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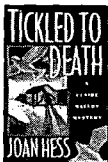
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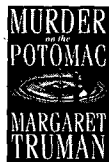
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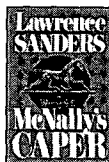
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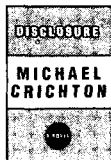
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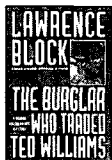
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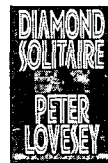
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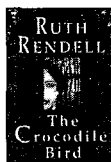
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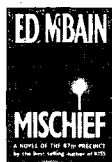
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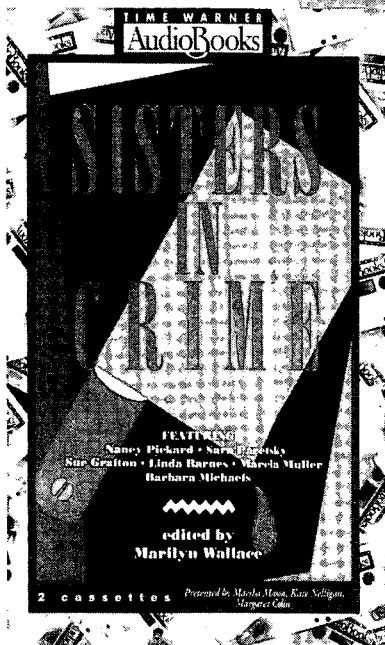
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**I**n this issue . . . Those World War II starlets are at it again, this time on location in the California desert where sabotage is afoot. Dan Crawford's "We're Going to Sing This Song All Night Today" follows two previous adventures of the intrepid foursome, "A Train of Stars" in our Mid-December issue and "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Walking" in February. Sissy is concerned about kitties in this one. . . .

We have two new authors to present this time. Claire M. Carter, author of "Suitable for Framing," hails from Kansas but presently lives in Rego Park, New York, has a degree in French, and with her husband runs a publishing/edito-

rial services company. She has published two stories in the literary magazine *Unknowns* and one in the July issue of *EQMM*.

G. L. Tassone, author of "The Volkswagen Heart," is retired and living in Florida these days after a fifteen year stint as a casino manager. Some thirty-five previous stories appeared in such magazines as *Playboy* and *Manhunt*. His hometown is Detroit.

Finally, we want to mention that our Mystery Classic, "The Whistling Room" by William Hope Hodgson, was published in his collection called *Car-nacki, The Ghost-Finder*. Hodgson, an Englishman, was killed in April 1918 at Ypres; his stories first became popular in this country in the 1940's.

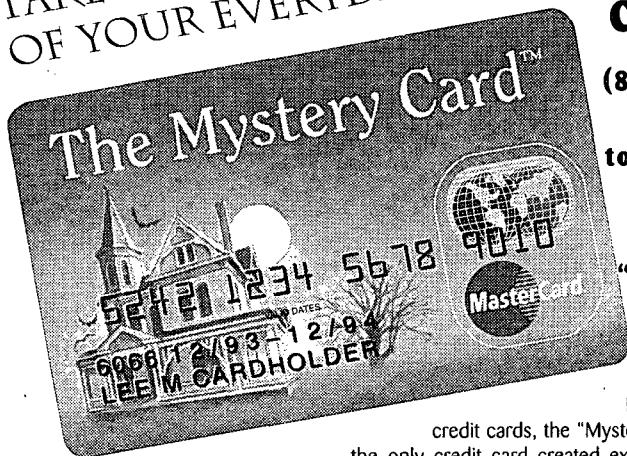
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# GOLIATH

by Jimmy Vines



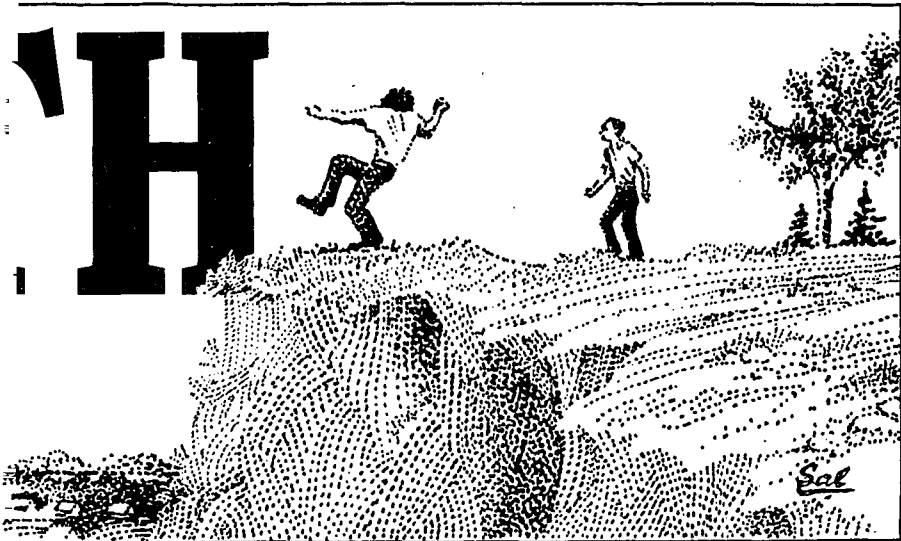
**S**aturday afternoon Freddy Forks and I went up to the top of Briar Cliff in his banged-up Ford; Freddy was drunk and acting half crazy like always, and I'd put away a few beers myself.

Freddy was bigger than most of the kids in Toupee, Georgia, and earlier this summer they'd started calling him Goliath. I'm pretty sure he started that name himself. He got real mad now if somebody called him Freddy to his face because he really liked that name Goliath. When I was talking to him I called him that, but in my head he was still Freddy Forks—I'd known him a long time, so that's how I thought of him.

He looked something like the Goliath from the Bible: dark tan, big shoulders and arms, jaws that looked like they could crush stones. Freddy was seventeen, a year older than me. Freddy told me he was supposed to be home cutting the front yard for his old man but that he'd slipped out of the house when his dad went out back to check the oil in the lawn mower. Freddy's dad always checked the oil in the mower himself because he knew Freddy wouldn't; Freddy would just say he had, and what would they do if the damn lawn mower burned up?

Anyhow, we went up the steep, winding road, up the back of the





cliff, and Freddy stomped the gas pedal every time there was a straightaway. I was hotter than the devil so I rolled my window down, but the road going up the back of Briar Cliff was so dusty it nearly choked me and I had to roll the window up again. Freddy kept slamming the pedal to the floor every time he got the chance, and the truck kept lurching and listing to the sides of the road. Like I say, he was a wild man and almost always a little drunk, but this day was really one of his showoff days.

When we got to the top where it levels off and the road sort of ends abruptly, Freddy skittered the little truck across the top of the cliff, screaming and whooping like going across the bumpy stuff was more exciting than it really was. I got the idea he wasn't going to stop. That's what he wanted me to think, of course, so I didn't let on like I was afraid, but I was. The sky was as blue as the shiny backs of those salamanders you see up there sometimes among the rocks.

Freddy brought the truck to a sliding halt very close to the edge of the cliff. Then he grinned that crooked, fishhook grin of his and threw the truck in reverse. The tires spun a while, throwing up gravel and bottle caps and stuff against the gas tank, and all the

time I had my eyes on that high blue sky—all I could see from the windshield, we were that close to the edge.

Finally the truck gained ground and we backed off from the edge, and when we were in the clear again, Freddy hooked the wheel around and stomped the pedal and we were doing doughnuts. I tell you, he was crazier than a cheap bottle rocket, but that was Freddy, and I knew what to expect when I got in the truck with him.

Lots of kids come up to Briar Cliff on weekend nights—there's not much to do in Toupee, Georgia, and nobody has any money really—but Freddy and I came up here often during the day, like now, when it was quiet, because it was fun to look down on the little town below, watch the different colored smoke from the stacks at General Paper Box, and fantasize about jumping off. Freddy sometimes played like he was going to jump off, getting a running start and then leaping when he was at the edge, but he'd leap straight up, not out, and he couldn't fool me with that trick any more. But the first time he did it I thought he was a goner.

Well, this Saturday we were all alone up there, and when Freddy finally stopped the truck and got out, it was very quiet. I heard only a couple of birds and a plane off somewhere in the distance; aside from that it was only me and Freddy—and the tiny town below us. He reached behind the seat and threw me a beer, and cracked the top off one for himself. We walked out across the top of the cliff. A few pines grow up there, but not many; it's mostly weedy and full of briars because the cliff is real rocky and the soil's not good. There are a lot of beer cans and candy and cigarette wrappers up there, blackened areas in the dirt from fires, and I've stumbled across tangled underwear a couple of times. All that trash makes me a little sick to think about, but that's what happens to a place where kids go.

Freddy did his trick of running to the edge and jumping up, and then he turned and ran full speed at me, sloshing beer, growling, his eyes turned up so he showed only the whites. Freddy had a bad limp because one of his feet was wrong; my mom said that's why he acted like he did, to make up for his foot. I don't know why he acted that crazy, all I know is that I didn't have all that many friends so it was good to bum around with old Freddy sometimes.

He tackled me. My beer can fell out of my hand, but miraculously it landed on its bottom and none of it spilled. It foamed out all over the place, but I thought it was pretty funny that it didn't tip over. Freddy didn't notice. He was chugging his beer; he hadn't fallen

when he hit me. A big fat frog waddled past my head, sort of half hopping, half running. I hoped Freddy wouldn't see it because he was unnaturally cruel to all little animals. I think that's why he liked to come up to the top of the cliff during the day so much, because he could see our small town from up so high. On the cliff he was bigger than everything else; the people down there looked like bugs.

I didn't get up. I just propped on my elbows and sipped beer, looking at the wonderful sky and filling my lungs with the dry August air. My T-shirt was sticking to me, but I didn't take it off because it kept me cool. Freddy was wearing his faded green army shirt with the cut-off sleeves which he wore all the time no matter whether it was summer or winter.

He fished around in one of his pockets for a minute and pulled out something that I thought at first was a can of Skoal, but then I realized it wasn't. He flipped it up in the air a couple of times and then held it in front of my eyes real close, too close to focus on it, and he said, "You know what this is?"

"No," I said, pushing his hand out of my face.

"Hockey puck," he said, grinning that lopsided grin.

I'd never seen a hockey puck up close, and I'll bet Freddy hadn't either—that's why he seemed so proud of it. There were no ice rinks in Toupee, and I had only a vague notion of how the game was played. But I expected Freddy to start in on a story of how he was really a champion hockey player and that his family had a secret underground hockey arena below their house, built especially for him because he was training for the Olympics. Freddy always came up with incredible lies like that, and I think he half believed himself sometimes. I'd always known that Freddy was a liar, so I just sort of went along with his lies to see how far he'd take them. It was no use trying to trap him in his falsehood, though, because that would only make him mad and he'd beat the snot out of me. Freddy was a lot bigger than me, but I think I mentioned that.

Freddy did not lie this time. I was surprised. Instead, he told me he'd found the puck and carried it around for a couple of days before showing it to his dad, who told him what it was. I figured Freddy had stolen it somewhere, but I didn't say so. I just nodded and sipped my beer.

He got bored with flipping it up in the air and looked out across the sky toward the edge of the cliff. It didn't take me a second to

know what he was thinking. He was thinking about throwing the thing over the cliff. I stayed quiet, and watched him.

Freddy walked to the edge. He looked down on the town and passed the puck from hand to hand. The cliff is tall. I won't guess how tall because I'm bad at guessing facts like that, but the houses down there at the base of the cliff look like matchboxes; that should give some idea. It's as high as a mountain, but it's called a cliff because the front face is practically straight up, like a wall.

I never really could figure Freddy out, now that I think about it. I would have sworn that he would have made a big deal out of throwing the puck out over the town, but he didn't. He didn't even look back at me. I would have thought he would have made me dare him. But no. He just reared back and chunked the thing. I sat up to watch it go. And then I stood as I saw the puck get smaller and smaller, until it was a tiny black dot in the big blue sky. Freddy lost his footing for a moment when he followed through on the throw, but he didn't take his eyes off the puck either. We both watched it go, and I felt my heart sink a little when it was out of sight. I'd really wanted to touch the thing. I'd wanted to hold it. I didn't know if I'd ever be that close to a hockey puck again. Maybe that's why he threw it without warning. He didn't want me to get a good look at it. Freddy enjoyed the thought that the puck had been his and his alone. He didn't say so, but that's what I thought. Now it was gone.

"Well, let's go," he said. He walked to the truck.

So that's it? I thought. That's the reason we came all the way up here? Just so he could throw the crummy puck off the cliff?

"That was a pretty loony thing to do, Goliath," I said. "You could have killed somebody."

"Get in," he said. I think he was a little afraid of what he'd done. I think I could hear it in his voice. I got in the truck.

"You could have killed somebody," I said again. "Some old lady or something."

"I didn't kill no old lady," he said, turning up the radio.

"Think, if some old lady was in her garden digging sweet potatoes and that hockey puck just dropped out of the sky, out of nowhere—"

"Too hot for old ladies to be out today."

"But still—" I said.

"Shut up," said Freddy.

I shut up, and we didn't say anything else all the way back home.



In all the times I'd been up to Briar Cliff, nobody had ever thrown anything off the edge. Not even Goliath. I'm sure people had thought about it, but nobody *did* it. He was wacko, all right.

Once we were back in town, he dropped me off at my house, and I asked him where he was going. He told me he had to go cut the grass for his old man.

Isn't that strange? After shirking the job that morning he was all ready to go back and do it now. That Freddy; there's no figuring somebody like him.

Well, the rest of the story I'm telling only from what I heard, but it comes from good sources. Freddy's sister explained it all to the *Toupee Courier*, and his mom told my mom the story at church. Personally, I haven't talked to anybody about it; I've just been listening.

What happened is this:

Freddy went home and his dad was in the front yard cutting the grass. Freddy parked his truck in the driveway and got out, looked at his dad, who was hard at work, and then decided just to go in the house and forget about it. But at the front door Freddy apparently changed his mind; something made him want to finish the job he'd neglected earlier. The guy was impossible to figure.

Anyhow, he'd started out across the yard when something snagged on the lawn mower blade and whizzed from the opening where all the grass shoots out. The object caught Freddy in the forehead, right between the eyes, and he fell into the newly cut grass, dead on impact. What hit him was a hockey puck.

And nobody could figure out how that hockey puck got in the middle of the front yard, not even Freddy's grieving dad, who said he'd seen the thing before, that Freddy had showed it to him a few days ago.

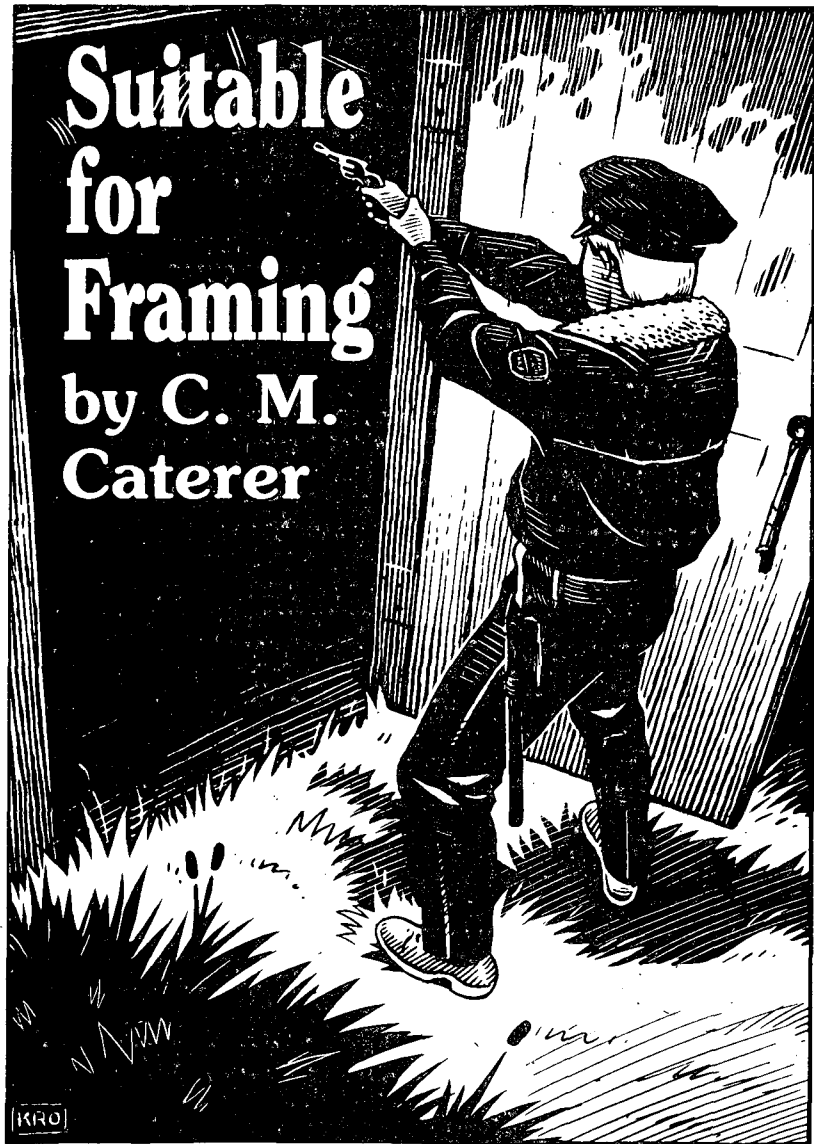
Nobody's asked me about it because until now I haven't told that I was with him right before it all happened. But that family down the street from Freddy—that strange-talking family that just got transferred here from Cincinnati by the General Paper Box factory—definitely had *something* to do with it. From what I hear, they have a pair of hockey sticks hanging on their den wall above a shelf full of trophies.

I'll bet Freddy stole that puck, but what does it matter now? Goliath, he called himself. Was the real Goliath a thief?

FICTION

# Suitable for Framing

by C. M.  
Caterer



*Illustration by Dan Krovatin*

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I have dragged more men—and women—kicking and scratching into jail than you'd ever want to sit up and count on a winter's night, even if you had nothing to do. I've handled some tough ones: drunks who can't walk straight, types that like to play John Wayne with their little penny shooters, kids who seem just aching to get themselves hurt. Most do go quietly, knowing as any idiot does that any trouble they cause is their own, not mine. But the truly tough ones are not, mark me, the strugglers. Greg Olsen was just such a one.

When I read him his rights there in his little shack up on West Lighthouse Road, near the Point, he stood as still as a bee perched on a flower. The silhouette of his ex-wife lay behind him, chalked onto the wooden floor, but he didn't give it a glance. He just looked at his shoes like he had no idea he was being spoken to, much less arrested for murder in the first degree, and finally I gave him a little poke and said, "Greg, you understand what I've been saying to you?" And he looked up right away and said, "Sure, sheriff. But I'm not worried." And that's when I started to do the worrying for him.

Olsen had nothing on his side. Strike number one, he

wasn't a native to Garth's Reach. Islanders in general have little but contempt for the summer folk: always blowing in from Boston or New York, driving their cars fast and loud on our little windy roads, moaning about how we don't have this and why don't we have that, and how there's hardly any parking and do we think they can eat seafood *all* the blamed time, so why don't we get ourselves a McDonald's or one of those joints? Not to mention that the locals got it into their brains somehow that the tourists are killers—I mean literally. Even though it was one of their own who played accomplice to killing that real estate bum earlier this summer. Well, you can't tell these people anything. I've been sheriff going on twenty-three years, but it's always, "MacReady, my mother remembers you in the cradle"—like that means something.

Strike number two, Greg wouldn't talk—that's what made him so troublesome to me. He's one of that school that thinks every cop is out to get the average citizen. Every time I asked a question, all he said was, "I'll wait for my lawyer, Mac"—like a P.O.W. giving out name, rank, and serial number. Well, I'm no Nazi interrogator. And even if a cop ain't always your

friend, I was a friend of Greg's and I thought I could help him if he'd just open up. But he was going to do it his way.

Once we got Olsen safely in the cell—I asked Hillary, my secretary, to keep her good eye on him—I took Riley back with me to West Lighthouse. I didn't want to, mind you; Riley gets under my skin plenty. But he is supposed to be the deputy, and I try to keep him from noticing how I never give him anything to do.

"Why even bother looking around?" he asked me. I glanced over at the passenger seat. His little black ponytail was bobbing up and down to something or other.

"Take off those damned ear-phones if you're going to say something." I never know if he's listening to me or the junk in his head.

He slid the headset off his temples but kept it round his neck with the phones pointed up so we could both hear the clashing and moaning coming from his tape. I grunted and shifted weight. My old gimp leg was beginning to talk, and that machine only made it talk the louder.

"What I said was, why even bother looking around? Looks like Greg Olsen's fate is sealed." Riley made the motions of licking an envelope and

fastening it shut. "Besides, it'll be out of our hands pretty soon."

"Nothing's ever that open-shut." I eased the car up the hill of Garth's Drive. The transmission dragged some and then coughed into gear. "I don't care what it looks like. He just don't seem like the killer type."

Riley gave a little yip of a laugh, the kind where the body leaps up out of the seat for a second. The kind that sets a normal fellow's teeth on edge. "That's really scientific, Mac. You're a regular Columbus."

"It's Columbo, you idiot."

"Whatever."

Garth's Drive began to narrow, and the sea, on our left, dropped down farther. The coast looks awful lonely in October, especially in New England. Our Garth's is no Carmel-by-the-Sea is what I mean. The sea just thrashes the harder as autumn draws up, almost like it's using up all its energy before winter. Even the reeds look to be standing up straighter.

A half mile farther on, that road collapses into sandy gravel. A quarter mile past that, just before you get to Lighthouse Point, is the little saltbox Greg Olson had been fixing to buy before his ex-wife wound up dead on the living room floor.



"I don't know what you expect to find," Riley said as he unlocked the door.

"I just want to take another look round, if it's all the same to you." I pushed past him and my bad leg locked on me. Ruined my entrance, what there was of it, but I didn't let Riley see me grimace. On top of the rheumatism, I got a bullet wound there not two months ago that the weather just won't let rest.

Greg's place was nothing but a living room, kitchen, and back bedroom, with the bath somewhere behind the bedroom. It was cosy, with a big old stone fireplace and Greg's fishing gear strung all round. I'm one who likes to see a man's hobbies out, not hid away in a glass case someplace. Greg had invested in some of that "natural" type woodframe furniture they sell in Caren's Collectibles, but just the necessities—sofa, rocker, couple of Alpine chairs. No TV in the place; just a shortwave radio sitting on the dinner table at one end of the room.

Riley rubbed his hands together. "Heat in here's pretty bad."

"Hmmp"—by which I meant I agreed. You could almost see your breath in there.

"Hey, looka this, Mac." I walked over to where Riley was

craning his neck up the wall. Greg had some glass cases, after all, those fancy bookshelves with the glass doors and little wooden handles, all chock full of some of the oldest books you'd like to see. All leather bound and gold-stamped, even though some were cracked along the spines. About two hundred of them.

*"Leaves of Grass, Paradise Lost, The Complete Robert Frost—"*

"I can read 'em."

"I didn't know he was such a brainy guy," said Riley.

"He's a professor of something," I said. "I think he was fixing to write a book."

Riley gave me his aren't-you-a-dope-Mac smile. "He's no professor. He told you that?"

"He said so at the Seahorse not a month ago. We had a beer."

"Shows how long it's been since you were in school. He's a student, that's what. He's getting his Ph.D. He just teaches sometimes. He's no professor."

"Okay, okay." I hate getting my facts wrong, and what I hate most is getting them wrong when Riley gets them right.

"He goes to some school in western Mass. He used to be a big deal tennis player there. That's what Todd Draker said."

"There's a source. Kid's brain must be Swiss cheese after all that pot he did in school."

"You don't *do* pot. You smoke it." Riley wandered away from the bookcase. "Come on, Mac. Let's just let the state guys deal with it."

"They're more interested in nailing Greg Olsen than in finding out who really strangled his wife."

"Look, Madeline Creighton heard them fighting from a quarter mile off at her house. Greg's prints are on that scarf back at the station. The house was locked up tight. Sorry, Mac. I thought he was an okay guy, too, but use your head."

"Chain lock wasn't on the door. Someone could've gotten in. Madeline Creighton's an idiot. And what about the autopsy?"

"What about it? She had some abrasions on her neck—that's normal. She died from strangulation." Riley loves words like *abrasions*. It's why he got into police work.

"Well, if there were some abrasions, as you say, there ought to be some blood on that scarf. And they found those brown fibers, too."

"Could be anything. Maybe she didn't bleed."

"Too easy. The murder weapon just happens to be lying right near her with Greg's

prints on it? In black? His hands were clean when we brought him in."

Riley scratched his one eyebrow—the eyebrow that covers both his eyes. "So he washed his hands. I would've, too. Come on, there's no big mystery here, Mac." He put a hand on my arm and spoke about as kindly as he can manage. "You're not going to find anything in here. We checked the place clean, and that shed outside's locked. Even Greg doesn't have a key to it. I think it's pretty simple. Ex-wife comes over, they have a fight; the storm kicks in, so she stays over. Later he kills her. She was fooling around on him, Mac, he had a good motive."

Faintly the sound of the sea thrashing the rocks below floated up to us. The sky turned gray as I looked at it from the window. My breath wafted out in little puffs. "Too damned cold in here. Let's go."

That made Riley happy. He'll do anything to get back to that toasty station, prop his feet up on the desk, and pretend to be working when what he's really doing is shooting the bull with Hillary.

Why I ever let my deputy question witnesses is beyond me. I always end up going back and doing it over myself, just to

be sure he got everything. He had taken down Madeline Creighton's statement, and reading over it, I noticed a few things that gnawed at me. Things I would've cleared up if I'd been running the show.

Madeline lived just down the road from Greg Olsen, right about the place where West Lighthouse turns into Garth's Drive. She and her husband had a little bungalow set back from the road like all those places are, where she kept a vegetable garden and a small boy. She had about as much sense as Riley, but she was all we had.

"Sheriff MacReady, now you just come in! In, that's right, and give me that wet coat. Don't step out of the hall yet. Look at your shoes! Could you take them off? Starting to rain, is it?"

Starting? I was dripping a flood onto her parquet floor.

Her boy, one fist in his mouth, stared at me from behind one of her legs. "Brigham, you go play now. Sheriff and me've got to talk." She shooed him into the TV room and then nestled her ample self into a chair opposite where she planted me. She leaned forward and I took that unlucky moment to sneeze. I was sure I was catching my death out there.

"You really ought to do something about that. You know you can spread germs just shaking hands with somebody? Brigham told me that the other day. Learned it in school." She sat up and smirked. "Remembered it, too."

I wasn't sure if she meant her or the boy. "I don't guess you'd have a cup of coffee or tea?"

Madeline gave a quick, puffy sigh and stood up. "Sheriff, I thought you were here to talk about this killing, not take refreshments! Isn't this just like the PTA!"

"If it's any trouble—"

"Oh, it's no trouble. God knows I'm used to it," she shouted from the kitchen, where I heard her filling the kettle. When it was safe on the burner, she raced back to me. "All right now. Let's talk us up some murder."

I brought out my notebook and flipped till I found a dry page. My pencil was only a stub, but seeing as she wasn't about to offer me a better one, I made do. "Now, Deputy Riley tells me you heard something the night of this incident? That would be—"

"Wednesday, October the tenth. Oh yes, I sure did. I was witness to quite a bit of it, if you want the truth."

"That'd be nice."

"Well, what did you *think* I was going to tell you? Some pack of lies? First off, I saw that pesky Mrs. Olsen going up to see him—the killer, I mean. Saw her drive right by in that fancy car. The BMU."

"Maybe you mean BMW?"

"I never was a car person, sheriff, I won't lie to you. Got too much to do to worry about *that*." She jumped up when the kettle started to sing. "I just can't believe this day—rain and all, and tea, and it's the housekeeper's day off, wouldn't you know?" She clattered out a couple of cups and brought them out brimming, then ran back to the kitchen. "I just have the feeling you're a sugar person," she shouted. "It would figure, on Patty's day off."

I'm not a sugar person, but I put in a couple of spoons to make her happy. "What time would it be that the BMW went by your place on Wednesday? Do you remember?"

"Sure do. I was out tending my vegetables, and this car came roaring by—setting up a racket like you wouldn't believe—so I couldn't hear what my Patty shouted to me from the kitchen. I said to Patty, 'Sorry, I couldn't hear you, on account of that car.' And she says, '*Jeopardy's* on in half an hour, you want me to start the dinner?' 'Cause that's when we

like to have it, when *Jeopardy's* on. I told her sure, what did she think, we were going to change our routine right now? So I figure this was about six thirty." She took a sip of tea. "At night."

"Fine." It took me three words to note down what it took her about fifty to say.

"And a few minutes later—I'm still out in my yard—the yelling started. It was the fiercest thing you ever heard, sheriff. The language! I'm only too glad my Brigham was so engrossed in his cartoons that he didn't hear."

"You're saying you could hear these people yelling at each other inside their own house a quarter mile away?"

She pinked a bit. "I'm not saying they were in the house. I think they must've been out in the drive, 'cause it was clear as a bell. You know how there was that big storm that night, and it was windy as anything just before it hit. So the wind musta carried their voices so's I could hear 'em."

"You knew for sure this was Greg Olsen and his wife doing the shouting?"

"Well now, who else could it a been? Nobody was out driving that night. They all knew the storm was coming. The road was empty. I know, 'cause I took a peek up the road when



I heard 'em yelling. Besides, I know his voice. I talked to him often enough."

"Hmmmph." I tried to keep from grimacing as I took a little tea. Stuff was so damned sweet I could hardly drink it. "How long did this yelling go on?"

"Oh, I'd say a good ten minutes, maybe. And then—" she nodded and blinked slowly "*—it just stopped. Made me wonder.*"

"You didn't wonder enough to give me a call about it."

That got her good. She started stammering all over the place and fixing her dress over her knees and fiddling with her earring. "Now that's not exactly true. I *did* think about it, but Ray thought I'd better not, that it wasn't any of my business. And I don't like sticking my nose into other people's personal matters. I was following his advice is all."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"Well, the storm started up soon after. There was so much rain and wind whipping around I wasn't really paying any mind. I had to shut the window, too, and they musta gone inside."

"So," I said, taking my notes, "nothing else that night?"

"Oh no, there was more," she said. Too eager, I thought. "About eleven Ray and I went to bed. And then sometime in the

middle of the night—I don't know when—there was a big noise, a big bang. I thought a tree had fallen 'cause of all the wind. But I went to the window and the storm was over. I looked out, but I couldn't see anything. Then I heard it—the shouting again. Louder, seemed like. More lovely language. I got mad then and shut the window. Then I went back to sleep."

She crossed her legs and smiled. Her shakes were gone, and I wished I could put them back into her. I folded up the notebook. "Are you sure those were the same voices you'd heard earlier in the evening? Could've been some kids, maybe, having a fight by the road?"

"I know a voice when I hear it, sheriff," said Madeline, and fixed her mouth at me. "Are you saying I don't?"

"Just double-checking. Pays to check everything twice. Thanks for the tea." I closed my eyes and gave it a brave swallow.

Madeline led the way to the door. "I always knew that Greg Olsen was a killer. Those college types often are. I guess you know about the Loeb and Leopold case, don't you? It was on TV last spring. *Those* two were very smart. Oh yes sir. But just two common murderers, even so."

"Thanks very much, Mrs. Creighton. You've been quite a help."

Little Brigham reappeared by her leg as she waved to me. "Oh, anytime, sheriff. You come by anytime you got a crime. I'm here to serve my community, that's how I feel."

The boy stuck his fist in his mouth again and waved at me a bit from his mother's hip. Somehow I felt like I was leaving the poor kid alone in a cell to serve a life sentence.

The rain had let up some by the time I got back to the station. I figured a strong cup of coffee to wash out the taste of that sweet tea was what I needed. When I walked in, Riley for once didn't have his grimy feet up on his desk. He was leaning forward—looking *interested*, actually—talking to a couple of strangers who looked mighty uneasy sitting there.

I flapped my hat against the side of the door jamb as Riley walked over. Water flew every which way. "Raining, huh?"

I shook the hat in his direction. "Yeah. Raining."

"Sheriff MacReady, these two are Mr. and Mrs. Hainey from Boston." The fellow stood up to shake my hand. He had a hard handshake, but the skin of his palms was a bit too soft

for my taste. He wore his hair in that greased-back way and had on a dark suit that must've set him back a sum. His wife, a wispy thing with wavy dishwater hair, just gave a little wave and whispered, "Nice to meet you."

"Bad weather to be traveling in," I noted, sitting on the edge of Riley's desk.

"Oh, we've been staying here," Mr. Hainey said, crossing his skinny legs. "We've been vacationing. In fact, we're getting ready to leave in the next few days." He had long, skinny white fingers that he kept crossing and uncrossing, too.

"Haven't seen you about," I said.

Riley leaned around me. "They come and go, Mac. They've been staying in the Seaside B&B."

"Hainey . . . Hainey . . . aren't you . . ."

"Yep, that's them," Riley said.

"Do you mind?"

"We own the house that Mr. Olsen is going to buy, up on West Lighthouse Road," Mr. Hainey said.

"That's right, that's what I remember. Riley, will you get your shoulder out of my backside?" Instead of waiting, I got myself a regular chair.

Mrs. Hainey coughed very softly and added, "We came about the—situation there up at the house. I was a witness." She smoothed back her wavy hair and even gave a kind of smile.

"A witness? What to, exactly?"

"Why, the murder, of course."

Riley threw me a look. "That's as far as we'd got before you came in, Mac."

"All right now, Mrs. Hainey, you just tell us everything you remember, nice and slow." My pencil was shot by this time. "Take it down, Riley."

"That's what I was *doing*."

"I wish I'd never seen a thing like that," Mrs. Hainey said, looking down at her hands in her lap.

"You were up near the Point on Wednesday, October tenth?" I pressed.

"That's right. I was visiting a friend of mine who lives on Seaside Way. Kyle had to go to Boston—" she stopped there and gave her husband a kind of sick puppydog look "—and I hate to be alone. So my friend Janet and I had dinner and then we played some cards. I was going to go home around nine, but then the storm sprang up and I didn't want to do any driving."

"That'd be Janet Burrows," I muttered to Riley, who gave me a little scowl.

"Right!" said Mrs. Hainey, pointing a long fingernail at me. "That's right. So I stayed a bit longer. I was going to sleep over, but then I saw the storm'd let up, and I didn't like to leave Reggie alone—"

"Reggie?"

"He's our little cocker, sherriff." Mr. Hainey patted his wife and smiled like a man does when he's talking about how his son struck out the last batter and won the Little League championship.

"Go on."

"It must've been about midnight or one o'clock. I drove across to West Lighthouse and noticed Greg's lights were on. I could see him there in the living room, standing up, with his back to the window. He was throwing his arms around, shouting. I guess his windows were open because I could hear some things he was saying—I wouldn't like to repeat them here."

"Was he alone?" I asked her. "Alone?"

"Yes, ma'am. Was he waving his arms around at himself? Shouting at himself?"

"Oh no, there was Mrs. Olsen, too. Standing in front of him."

Riley stopped to sharpen his pencil. I got up from my chair to stretch a bit and get the coffee that somehow I'd been distracted from. The wind whined through the planks of our little shingled station. "How'd you know it was Mrs. Olsen there with him?" I asked Mrs. Hainey. Her head jerked round like a rabbit's.

"Wasn't she the one who was killed?" Her voice had gotten a lot louder.

"That's not the point," I said. "I don't want to hear what you read in the papers. I want to hear what you saw there."

"I—I'd met her once before, I think. I *think*." Mrs. Hainey scrambled behind her shoulder for her husband's hand, which found hers.

"When was that?"

"I don't know." She craned her neck round to Mr. Hainey for some help. He put on a great show of concentration. "Well, we'd talked to Greg about buying the place, of course. I think she stopped by one day when we were there talking to Greg. She brought her lawyer. I guess that was the summer sometime."

"She was tall, with red hair, long red hair," Mrs. Hainey jumped in.

"Young? Old?"

"About my age." Mrs. Hainey smiled with a little blush. "That's about thirty, sheriff."

I coughed into my coffee cup. I didn't argue with her, but she was about as close to thirty as my big toe.

"Did you stop the car when you saw these two in the window?" Riley asked. I grunted, but I've got to let him ask something once in a while.

"I slowed down," she said. "That's when I saw it. Mrs. Olsen said something—shouted something—and then turned around. Then Mr. Olsen pulled something off the chair and threw it around her neck and strangled her from behind."

Mrs. Hainey gave a bit of a shudder. Her husband patted her shoulder. She even covered her eyes for further effect, but this performance didn't move me much.

Riley kept taking it down like it was the answers to a final exam. "Did you see what he grabbed off the chair?"

She shrugged. Having a hard time keeping back the tears, it looked like. "Something long and white," she managed to say. Her voice had got small again.

Enough was enough. I pulled my coat off the rack. "You can finish up here, Riley. I think I need something to eat."

"But, Mac, what about—"

"Go on, now. You just sum it up, write a report, I'll look at it later." I gave him a grin he

didn't see too often. "I leave it all in your capable hands."

That shocked him enough so he couldn't say anything, not until I was safe out the door and in my warm car.

**I**t's not my habit to bug out on a witness's statement—especially since I'm usually taking them myself, not relying on Riley—but sometimes I need to get away from all the chatter and just think the thing through. A chat between sheriff and witness is no damned tea social, after all. You're discussing some poor fellow's welfare who everybody's already got cold guilty in their mind, which isn't the way it's supposed to work. I'll tell you something else about witnesses, too: they get to feeling pretty important, having seen something like a murder. They read about it in the paper, how the cops're all perplexed, and then they start thinking maybe they saw something they didn't. Maybe what Mrs. Hainey, driving through a drizzly night, saw from the road—which isn't right next to the house—was Greg Olsen coming up behind his wife to comfort her, placate her. I don't know anything about marital matters—never wanted to—and even less about divorce matters. I just hate to see a fellow like Greg get some-

thing pinned on him by some prissy forty-five-year-old woman who's trying to be thirty. You see what I mean.

I drove around a bit and then found myself at Janet Burrows' place, confirming what Mrs. Hainey had said. Janet told me yes, Mrs. Hainey had come up to play canasta or some such dopey game, and she had left about midnight. Not that she would, or should, but she hadn't heard any shouting. Her windows were shut up tight because of the storm. She was surprised, though, that her friend hadn't told her anything about witnessing a murder—here it was two days later and they'd talked on the phone. "You won't tell her I said this, sheriff," said Janet, "but Vicky's a bit of a gossip. If she knows something hot like that, she doesn't keep it a secret. She must have been worried about the security of the matter."

Must have, all right. But I doubted that would stop her.

Plymouth Harbor, on the east side of Garth's Reach, is the busiest port we have. It's where the ferryboats coming over from Massachusetts dock and pick up passengers. Hence the Seahorse, a nice little tavern right on the water, does a happy business. But even the Seahorse was quiet that day.

Winds left over from Wednesday's storm still kept the waters uneasy, and in October, visitors come less and less frequently anyway. The whole island was quieting down to its dreary stretch of winter.

"Got yourself a hot one, hey, Mac?" said Lil as she slid me over my usual Sam Adams. Lil's okay—could stand to lose about a hundred pounds, but as two old unmarrieds, we're kindred spirits.

"I guess so."

"Now what's the long face? You always said you like 'em neat and clean. No complications. For once you got yourself one. Even heard you got a witness."

I sat up at that. "Where'd you hear? Who said?"

Lil settled her generous backside against the sink. "I'd be out of a job if I started telling you that sort of thing."

"Oh, I suppose it doesn't make a difference. I'd swear this whole island was bugged the way people know things the minute they happen." I took a sip of the beer. The only sounds were the wind creaking against the building and the cool tap of the pool cues. The place was dead. "It's just that I liked old Greg. And he's not the type."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I know what they say. But there is a type, I think. Now,

think about it: a mild-mannered fellow like Greg, teaches poetry and all, does some kind of writing—a sweet guy. His wife walks out on him. So he leaves town for the summer and comes out to Garth's Reach to rent a little place and do some fishing. He likes it all right, so he thinks he might like to buy it—maybe even take a break from school and stay awhile. Now is that a killer?"

"Could be." Lil ruffled her salt-and-pepper curls. "You never know what somebody's capable of in a romantic situation."

"I guess I don't."

"Hey, I'm no expert myself." The sink gave a creak when Lil stood up. "But even the sweetest of folks, when they get burned, a whole other side of them comes up. What about that girl, Jolene Murray? Seemed like a sweetheart, yet she covered up for the murder of that fellow who dumped her."

"Mercy, don't get me started on Jo. That one hurt." I was still nursing grief over that.

"You're making it more complicated than it is." Lil ran the tap into my mug again. "This wife comes over, they get in a fight, all that hurt comes back to him, and that's that."



"But they got in *two* fights, that's what I don't get. She comes down—and what for, anyway? all the way from Boston for what?—they scream at each other in the drive for a bit, and then instead of her taking off, she stays all night. Until around midnight, when suddenly they have another fight and he kills her. That make sense to you?"

"Maybe she couldn't leave because of the storm," said Lil. "That was a fierce one, the first one of the fall. She sure couldn't have gone back on the ferry and didn't want to drive down to one of the inns." Lil squeezed herself a seltzer water. "The whole west side of the island got its power knocked out. Mine was gone for most of the night."

"Wait a minute—what's that?"

"What's the matter, you live in a cocoon out at your place? From about ten to dawn it was out. Probably a lot of people never knew it. You know how they are around here—early to bed."

I picked up my hat from the bar and laid a few bills down. "I better get going."

"What's your hurry? Don't you want to finish your beer?"

"No time. I got to go talk to Greg Olsen."

As I was running out the door into the new drizzle, I caught a glance of Lil tipping up the dregs of my Sam Adams into her own mouth. I guess she'd earned it.

"He won't talk to you," Riley said, pulling the keys from his belt. "I've been trying to strike up a conversation. He wants to wait for his lawyer."

"He won't need a lawyer if he talks to me," I said. "When are they coming to pick him up?"

"First thing tomorrow. That gives you about another fourteen hours." Riley sniffed. It's no small sniffer he has, and it does its job. "What's that on your breath? Beer?"

"Mind your own business. And get me that scarf. The one with Greg's prints on it."

I opened the door to the back room, where the jail cell is. Pitiful way to design a sheriff's office, I've told the mayor, to lock up a suspect away from the rest of the world, not even out in the open where he can see daylight coming and going. All's I get is a grunt for a reply.

Greg sat on the lower bunk, leaning forward, chin in his hands. He reminded me of a picture I'd once seen of Abe Lincoln—tall and skinny like Abe, he is, too—before he'd got his beard, leaning forward like that. Only the picture shows

Abe with a book in his hands, reading by the light of an oil lamp. Poor Greg wasn't even doing that. Aside from the Lincoln resemblance, Greg was a handsome fellow, glasses, wavy blond hair, good build if a bit slight. That wife of his didn't know what she was giving up.

"How're you doing?" I said, extending him a hand.

"I'd stand up," he said, "but you took my belt, and—"

"No explanations needed." Riley came back with the scarf and opened the cell as I pulled up a chair. He gave me a look that I took to mean "Good luck, you'll need it" and went back to his crossword or whatever the hell he'd been doing.

"If you're here to grill me again, forget it," said Greg. "I told you I wasn't worried, and I'm not. When my lawyer gets here this whole thing will be cleared up."

"I'd like to think that was the case," I told him. I pulled the scarf out and wound it around my hand. "But it doesn't matter if you're innocent as can be. What matters is what the jury thinks. And right now, if they were to listen to me rattle off the facts, they'd hang you."

Greg just shrugged.

"Do you even know what the facts against you are?"

"I guess."

"I guess not." I stood up to stretch the gimpy leg. The rain was bugging it something fierce. "Here's the situation: You were the last person to see Mrs. Olsen alive. We have a witness who saw her driving up to your place. The same witness claims to have heard a fight you had with her out on your driveway about six P.M. Then we have a witness who was driving by and saw you strangle your wife. That's at about midnight. We come over the next day when you phone us and find the murder weapon—" I held up the scarf "—on your premises with your fingerprints on it. Now, no one broke into your house or broke out of it. Nothing's disturbed. No motive for anyone else to be killing your wife. You tell me: Is that a rosy picture or not?"

Greg looked up at me finally. His mouth hung open a little. "I didn't hear about any witnesses."

"New development."

He sat quietly.

"Circumstantial evidence is one thing," I said. "Good lawyer can sometimes—*sometimes*, that is—convince a jury that without a witness the case's no good. But a witness *and* circumstance—" I paused a second to dig out my pipe and tobacco "—that's bad." I spent about five minutes loading and tamp-

ing this idiot pipe I'm trying to smoke. I thought Greg might think us a little closer, a little more kindred, if he saw me with my pipe. Still he said nothing. Finally I went on, "Just seems to me that you and me're all right friends. I'm on your side—I still don't think you did it, not even in the face of all that's come out. It'd be nice if you'd help out a little, though. Even if you could just tell me why your wife came all this way when you're not even married any more, for instance."

"She came over to throw it in my face," Greg shot out all of a sudden. "How she's got a job and I don't. How she's going to marry somebody great and I'm not. How she knows everything and I'm a fool." He blinked and looked at his shoes.

"Hold on a second—I thought you were teaching at that college in western Mass."

"Check your calendar, Mac. The school year's started. Funding's down, and they cut me." He started kicking the floor with his laceless tennis shoes. "It's been a hell of a year for me. Here I am, no wife, no job, no real writing talent that's going to go anywhere. I sold one poem two years ago and nothing since. My wife got the house in the settlement. That's why I was going to buy this place. I

just wanted to get away. Even though this weather is murder on my arm." He rubbed his right elbow as he spoke.

"What's that?"

"Tennis injury," he said. "Both arms, really. I can hardly pick up a racquet any more. My biceps are in tatters." He gave a grim smile and waved his hand around the jail cell. "And now this whole situation."

The pipe finally began to take, and I puffed a little. I wanted to take it slow. "You're telling me those people were going to sell you a house and you didn't even have a job?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. I guess I got lucky. I told them I'd find another teaching position. They seemed to believe that."

"But here it is, October, and no job. They're still going to sell it to you?"

He gave a little cough of a laugh. "Not too likely now; Mac."

"Maybe you'd better tell me a bit more. Check me for bugs if you like. This is off the record, between you and me. Friend to friend. How about it?"

"Does a sheriff have any friends?" Greg asked.

He had me there, but I'd meant what I'd said. I didn't push, I just sat, puffing my pipe, holding my gimp leg out straight. Waiting. I had a feeling he was going to come

through, and after a minute, he started, his voice still quiet, just like you'd think the voice of a poet might be.

"She called me around noon to say she had something important to talk to me about. She'd heard I was going to buy that house, and she said I shouldn't trust the Haineys—that they had had some crooked real estate deals in the past in Massachusetts. She should know—she's a crackerjack agent, Mac. She really knows—knew—what she was talking about."

He paused and I looked away, to be polite. No way, I thought, did this fellow kill that girl. You could tell from his tone of voice. He held no hate for her. Nothing but a little bitterness.

"I didn't want her to come," he said at last. "She hurt me pretty badly, and I wanted to avoid seeing her. But she insisted. She's a licensed house inspector, too, and she wanted to do an inspection. For free. I told her I didn't need it. I knew she knew her stuff, but she's pulled some pretty cute tricks the last year." His voice caught again. "I thought she was trying to make a fool out of me, just flaunting her know-how. I thought she wanted to interfere, didn't want me to have my nice life out here on Garth's

Reach. She'd taken everything else of mine already."

I puffed on the pipe. It seemed to be working. "So you told her not to come?"

He nodded. "I told her, but I knew she'd come anyway. She got there sometime between six and seven."

"And you passed a few words between you?"

"I met her out on the driveway," Greg said. "The wind was strong enough nearly to knock us over. I was mad. My lawyer would faint to hear me say it, but I started yelling and screaming at her to butt out of my life. You don't know what she put me through. The humiliation." His eyes glazed over, and he looked down at his shoes.

"You don't have to go into all that if you don't want to," I said. I wasn't crazy about hearing it anyway.

"Well, after a few minutes it started to rain, and she ran inside ahead of me. So I was stuck with her, so to speak. At least I had been hosed down, if you will. I could be civil. She looked around the house and wrinkled her nose—that was a famous trick of hers—and said, 'I just can't believe you want to buy this place.' As if it were a dump. She started in again about how I haven't changed any, I'm still too trusting, and I don't check

into things, I'm not thorough. All the same crap she's been saying for the last year."

"Was she still willing to do this inspection for you?"

"Oh yes." Greg stood up and wandered over to the straight metal bars. "She was sure there was something wrong with the house and that's why the Haineys were willing to sell it so cheaply, especially since I was out of a job and my credit rating was shot. She said it was too good to be true."

I was beginning to think the same.

"I got mad again then. I told her the Haineys had been very kind to me throughout the whole divorce, and even let me stay here a couple of months for free. I told her the only odd thing about the place was that it seemed to be haunted."

I tried to keep my grin down. "I'll bet she bought into that straightaway."

"I shouldn't have said it, I realize. It only fed the fire. She laughed right in my face. She started in about my imagination and how I'm always dreaming my life away. But I'm telling you, Mac: I lived there, and there is something strange about it."

"What kind of strange?"

"Noises. In the middle of the night. Creakings and almost a moaning sort of sound. I hear it

all the time. I told Ronnie all about this, and she started laughing again. 'I'm just here for your own good, I don't mean to laugh,' she said, but she didn't try very hard to control herself. 'That's the foundation, Greg. The foundation is probably about to cave in. It could be termites.' I suppose it could be true." Greg scratched his chin and looked at me with watery eyes. "She was trying to do me a good turn, I suppose. She said I was a lot of things—irresponsible, undisciplined—but she didn't want to see me get taken. She almost apologized for everything. She said it was too bad things didn't work out for us. For a few minutes there she was really quite sweet."

"Just for a few minutes, huh?"

I saw his face turn red out of the corner of my eye. "Well, maybe longer. I told her I'd let her do the inspection in the morning, and she started wondering where she'd stay with the storm raging as it was. I suppose it was my idea to let her stay at the house. Once the power went out and all—"

I looked up at him quick. "So your power went out? When was that?"

"About twenty till ten. I know because my clock froze in that position. I brought out my

oil lamps and—well—I suppose it got very romantic.”

I didn't need to hear all about it. “I get the picture. When did you actually fall asleep?”

“Well, the clocks were out, as I say. It was after ten. Maybe around eleven.”

“Did you hear your wife get up?”

“That was another thing,” said Greg. “When the lights went, we sat in front of the fire and had some brandy. I had more than she did. I was out good for the night. I didn't hear anything or see anything until I woke up that morning. I saw she wasn't there, so I thought she'd woken up early and gone home. But then I went out into the living room and found her—as I told you at first.”

“You didn't hear anyone come in?”

“No. But I was out cold, as I said.”

I pulled the white scarf out of my pocket. Greg's fingerprints dotted one entire edge. “How about telling me where this came from? Was Mrs. Olsen wearing it when she came in?”

“No. It . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I don't want to get anyone else mixed up in this, Mac.”

“I'd say it's crucial that you do.”

He took off his glasses and started cleaning them with his

shirttail. “It was earlier in the day. Before Ronnie got to the house, Mrs. Hainey called me up to ask me something about the house, and I mentioned that Ronnie was coming out. I told her that Ronnie's very smart about real estate, so I thought I'd get her opinions.”

“How did Mrs. Hainey like that?”

“Like it? Oh, she thought it was a good idea. She told me how lucky I was to know someone in the real estate game.” Greg smiled grimly. “I feel terribly lucky these days.”

“You're saying she knew Mrs. Olsen was coming to see you?”

“That's right.”

“How did the scarf come up?”

“Well, I hung up the phone and went back to do some writing. About three hours later she called me again and said she was having some trouble with an old typewriter, and could I fix it for her? She knew I had this old portable and that I fiddled with it sometimes. I told her I'd be happy to.”

I let him finish but I knew what was coming.

“She came by with the typewriter. Turned out the ribbon was knotted up somehow, so I took it out and straightened it. I had to unspool most of it and then wind it back up again.”



"And my guess is your hands were plenty filthy by the time you were done," I put in.

"Well, yes—"

"And at some point Mrs. Hainey handed you the scarf she was wearing. Right again?"

"I don't see your point, Mac," Greg said, mighty cold for him.

"Yeah, you do. You see it crystal clear." I let the pipe go out, since it seemed to be of a mind to. "She handed you the scarf because she knew your prints would get all over it. In a nice dark black ink, too." I stood up, pretty angry at confirming what I'd been suspecting.

"That can't be what—"

"No? Then how come she said she saw you strangle that woman in a lit house when the power was off? She never could have identified you with the lights off, and because their place is on the east side of the island, she didn't know the power was off. So she told us the lights were blazing nice and bright. Goddamn, what an operator!"

Greg stood up, too. "I just can't believe Mrs. Hainey would do a thing like that."

"Well, I know what it means. This isn't the murder weapon."

"But who's to say it isn't? It could be. It could be unless the real weapon is found."

I stood up, and the knee cracked loud. I grimaced, and Greg held out an arm to help me. "Riley, come get me, will you?" I called down to the office. "Thanks, Greg. I appreciate your saying something. And don't you worry about the murder weapon." Riley arrived at his own sweet leisure and unlocked the cell. "I'm off to find it right now."

Damn weather wouldn't disappear—it just ptered out. The dark floated up, and the mist wafted down in a gentle kind of cloud as I urged the car up Garth's Drive. It's a mighty steep drop onto the rocks, but I know my way around. Besides, I didn't have much time before they were coming to get Greg, and I had a feeling all would not be quiet at that little shack near the Point.

Just my instincts said so as I wound the car up along Garth's Drive. Common sense told me that any killer worth his (or her) salt wouldn't leave the weapon there in plain sight—but then, if the killer had been Greg Olsen, would he leave that fingerprint scarf sitting there so handy next to the body? If there was something to be found, by God, I was going to find it. And with no Riley around to distract me or depress me.

Greg's little house sat on the rocks, gray and lonely, swallowed up almost completely in the mist. I let myself in and flicked the switch. The lights were working now. I had the scarf in one hand.

Even someone who left in a hurry, I figured, wouldn't leave a weapon out in the open. I checked the trash outside, all the wastebaskets, the closets. Nothing. I sat inside, smoking my own breath, disgusted. Greg was right. Without the real weapon, anything I said was pretty much supposition.

And then, after I'd been sitting three or four minutes in that thick quiet, a little sound floated by me. Nothing you'd notice in any other house, under any other circumstance; a rustle, maybe a quick run by a cold mouse, a shaking of boxes, a quick scamper over a stack of books. But I was going for any chance I could. I drew my gun and headed towards the garage, where the sound had come from.

The garage was separate from the house, no more than a shed out to one side. The padlock that had held the door closed a few days ago was missing. I stood in the wet grass with the sand caked on my boots and the tiniest drizzle going down the back of my neck. Then I burst through the door.

Dark. Windowless shed after sundown.

"I don't know who's there," I said, right into the black, "but this is Sheriff MacReady with a loaded gun, so don't be playing any games." I flicked the light switch but the bulb didn't even flicker. Another rustle floated out of the dark, uneasy. "Hainey, if that's you, don't be stupid. There's only one way out of here, and I'm blocking it."

Then all of a sudden the rustling got louder, and something crashed, like a pile of dusty books, and then something clanged, like a bicycle being knocked over. "Who's that?" came a squeaky kind of voice. "Sheriff? That's you?"

"You know damned well who it is. Get out here and show yourself."

The yard, what there was of it, was pretty murky, but even so I recognized Kyle Hainey's skinny face as he skulked out the door. "You frightened me, sheriff."

"What do you think you're doing in there?" I still held the gun out.

"I'm sorry—really. I was looking for some books I had stored in the shed here. We haven't cleared everything out yet." He held up a rusty key. "See? I didn't break in."

"No, you own the place. You got a right." He was shaking bad enough that I lowered the gun and then holstered it. I glanced down at the bag he was carrying. "You find what you were looking for?"

He raised his eyebrows at me like he hadn't heard. "What? Oh yes. Thanks. It's awfully dark in there. The bulb must have burned out. I'll have to fix that."

"Hmmmph."

"Well, sheriff, if you don't mind . . ."

"Matter of fact, I do mind just a little." I put a hand on his arm—not hard, but to mean business all the same—and said, "Would you mind coming back inside for just a minute? I want to clear a few things up about this Olsen thing."

"Well, I am due for an appointment . . ."

"On this island? On a Friday night?" I looked down at the bag again. "Must be some important books you had to come get before going to that appointment."

"Yes. Well—yes. Mrs. Hainey and I wanted to take them back to Boston tomorrow." He hugged the bag close to him.

"I'll only take a minute," I said, and led him inside the house. I pointed to one of Greg's Alpine chairs, and Mr. Hainey

took a seat, shoving his canvas bag back behind his ankles.

"As you know, sheriff, it was my wife who saw what happened. I don't think I can be of too much help to you."

"Funny how that was." I sat down on the sofa opposite him. "Seeing how the power was out, how she could've seen a light through this window."

"Was the power out?" Mr. Hainey shrugged and gave a little twitter that got under my skin. "Maybe it was. We keep the house stocked with oil lamps. Maybe it was an oil lamp she saw lighting the room."

"Could be. Could be." I pulled the scarf out of my pocket. "This look familiar to you, by any chance?"

I saw him change color just as sure as I saw his hands tremble, but he managed a troubled, bewildered sort of look. "No. Should it?"

"Belongs to your wife. She was wearing it when she brought a typewriter over to Mr. Olsen the afternoon of the murder." I leaned forward and spread the fibers out. "See the black stains? That's from the typewriter ribbon. She made sure Greg touched this scarf and got his prints all over it. I don't know if you know anything about police procedure, but prints are none too easy to

come by—not how the movies would have you believe. But this here—this is just too good to be true. Prints planted right on the scarf.”

A little strand of Mr. Hainey’s black hair came loose from the grease and fell down across his forehead as he shrugged. “You would know better than I. I suppose it could belong to Vicky. She could have left it here when she took the typewriter back home.”

I sniffed and rubbed my nose, which was chilled in that frosty house. “Could’ve. My guess is she did it pretty deliberately. All the more opportunity for Greg to put more prints on it.”

“And what would be the purpose of that?”

I laughed. “Now doesn’t that make it look a lot more like the murder weapon? And it makes Greg look a lot more like the killer.”

I was looking in Mr. Hainey’s eyes, but I still caught a glimpse of his foot pushing that canvas bag farther back behind his feet. “Sheriff, play Sherlock Holmes with someone else, if you like. The state is going to handle Greg Olsen. Why don’t you go back to busting your drunk drivers and those people who ride forty down Seaside Way?”

“I know that’s supposed to rile me, and it might work on

my deputy. But this isn’t the first setup I’ve ever been acquainted with, and knowing this place, it’s not going to be my last. I’ll tell you something interesting about the autopsy they did on Mrs. Olsen. Did you hear anything about it?”

“Of course not.”

I sat back now, kind of enjoying myself. “They found little tiny brown fibers in the collar of Mrs. Olsen’s nightgown and on her neck. Fibers that didn’t come from this scarf.”

“They could’ve come from anything.”

“Could’ve. But the marks on Mrs. Olsen’s neck show that whatever was used to choke her was wound around her neck quite a few times—like a noose.”

“Well, aren’t you the little detective?” he said in his snotty type voice, and then he stood up. “This is all fascinating, sheriff, and I commend you. May I go now?”

“Not just yet.” I held up the scarf. “Because, Mr. Hainey, if you take a look at this thing which your wife so conveniently left with Greg Olsen, it’s too short for that kind of a killing. No.” I wrapped the scarf around my hand a few times. “This thing is no more the murder weapon than my gun. The real weapon’s still around here someplace.”

Kyle Hainey took a half step towards the door. "Then don't you think you ought to be spending your time searching for it?"

"Oh, I've got plenty of time. But even if I find it, there's no way it could nail Greg Olsen."

His blue eyes fixed on mine.

A weary web of pain crept through my leg, and suddenly I stretched out my arm, running a finger along my bicep muscle. "Greg's got no strength in here," I said. "His body looks strong—to the layman, maybe. But Greg hurt himself playing tennis in college a few years back, and any doctor'd be able to tell that he couldn't strangle a fly, let alone a woman nearly as tall as him, not unless he could sit on her. Not standing up, that's for sure. Which kind of blows the witness's story away, don't it?"

"All right, all right! So he didn't kill his wife!" Mr. Hainey threw up his hands. His canvas bag swung about like a wild thing. "I don't care one way or the other! Do you want the truth? I'm happy my wife was wrong. I hope Greg gets off the hook. You seem to think I want him to go to prison. I don't! I don't!"

"That's good, Mr. Hainey. That's fine." I stood up. "So you'll help us all you can in finding the real weapon?"

Hainey reached the door and laid his hand on the knob. "I can't help you with that, sheriff. I wouldn't know where to start."

"My guess is that someone else wanted to get rid of Mrs. Olsen."

The hand froze.

"Someone who knew that she was smart about things like real estate. Someone who knew that she was coming to inspect this place. Someone who knew why you always heard funny creakings and moanings coming from the foundation at night." I smiled at Hainey's back. "You know what would be even better? A couple. See, then they could stage a good rip-roaring fight in the middle of the night just far enough from Madeline Creighton's house to make her think she heard something she didn't. But people like that, they'd be smart." His back flinched. "They'd come back to get the real weapon."

Still Hainey didn't move.

"I have a deputy waiting outside with a loaded gun," I said to his back. "I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

Hainey turned around but kept his hand on the door. His voice cracked wide open. "What kind of a fool would leave a murder weapon lying around?" he managed to say. Even in

that frosty air, the sweat was beginning to trickle down his face.

I shrugged. "Someone who might have a key to the shed out there. A key that Greg Olsen didn't have." I held out my hand. "Suppose you show me what you got in that bag there. My guess is some kind of brown rope with maybe a few traces of blood on it. But let's have a look."

He opened the bag, all right. He even pulled something out, but his bullet had no hope of finding me. I was quicker than he was—I'd been doing my target practice—and gave him a shoulder wound that sent that gun to the floor.

"Concealing a weapon," I said, picking up the gun with a corner of my jacket. I emptied his canvas bag, and the coil of rope slid out neat as you please. No books, I noticed. "That's not going to look too good on your record, either." I cuffed his wrists together.

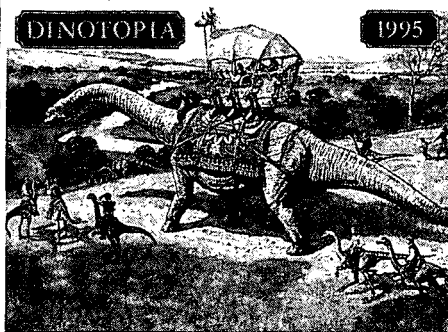
"What in hell do you think you're doing? You're not dragging me into your filthy office! What about my shoulder? What are you going to do about that? And what about my phone call? I intend to speak to a lawyer! Oh yes! I intend to speak very loudly to a lawyer!"

I read him his rights as we walked out to the car. His head jerked around every which way at the shrubbery. "There's no deputy here. That was a little white lie I told."

"That's entrapment! Or something like it! It's something illegal!" Most of his hairs had come loose by now and were flying all over his head. From the driver's seat I could feel blobs of grease hitting the back of my neck. "I'm not saying anything, I'm not saying one word, until I see my lawyer! Do you hear me? Not one damned word!"

I smiled at him in the rear view mirror. As far as I was concerned, he could stay quiet as long as he liked.



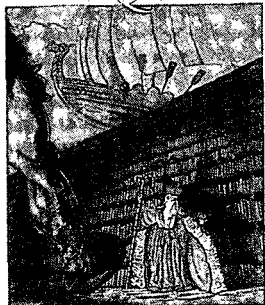


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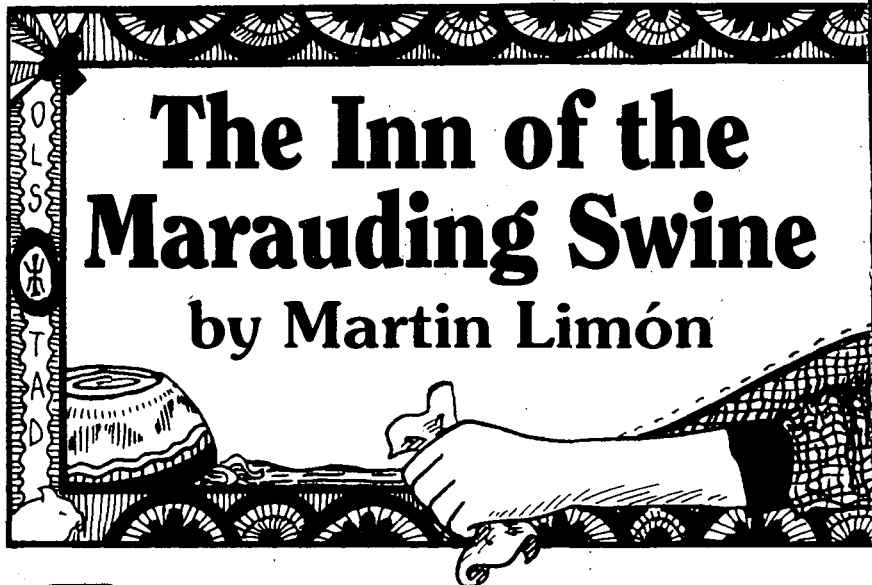
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# The Inn of the Marauding Swine

by Martin Limón



The portly restaurant owner ladled hot sauce into the steaming bowl of pork rib noodles and presented it to the prince. "Are your culinary skills truly great, Fatty Pang," the prince asked, "or is your reputation in the Kingdom of Ch'u nothing more than idle belchings and hot gasses?"

"Taste it yourself, oh prince," the restaurateur said, bowing. "We of the Inn of the Marauding Swine quaver in anticipation of your verdict on its edibility."

Fatty Pang's husky daughter, Kuei-lan, plopped a simmering bowl in front of Hong, the Royal Food Taster. The tops of his soft jowls wrinkled to his nose, and after a quick taste he made a long-practiced exchange, deftly sliding his bowl towards the prince. Kuei-lan started at this—confused—but recovered the impassive peasant lines of her face. She methodically served the rest of the entourage seated at the large round table.

The Court Poet, Meng Li, raised his cup of red millet wine. "To the long life of Prince Shi and the eternal victory of the Kingdom of Ch'u."

The men dug into their meal amidst much merriment. Meng Li marveled at the relaxed atmosphere. Of all the royal courts where



he'd labored as a wandering poet amongst the warring kingdoms, he'd never seen a land filled with so much tolerance and goodwill as the Kingdom of Ch'u. The young Prince Shi laughed heartily at the slightest joke. This despite the fact that he was first in line to ascend the throne when his father, King Yongyuan, left this illusion of reality men call life. The young prince was not filled with the overblown suspicions and foolish jealousies so common amongst the other royal families Meng Li had seen, and he had no qualms about mingling with the common people.

For once Meng Li actually enjoyed the company of his royal patron; even the mind-wrenching work of churning out spontaneous poetry had become less of a chore.

Food Taster Hong looked up from his bowl of pork and noodles sourly.

"Is the food not to your liking?" the prince asked. "This place opened only a few days ago, and already it is the talk of the city. Certainly the Great Hong does not find the fare distasteful?"

"On the contrary, Great Leader, the food is delicious. The best pork rib soup I've ever tasted. That is the problem."

"The problem? How can enjoying your meal in the fine surroundings of this new inn be a problem?"

"I've been to virtually every eatery not only here in the capital city of Taiying but in most of the shops and stands that purvey food in the Kingdom of Ch'u. My dissertations on the art of food preparation have gained eternal fame throughout the Five Kingdoms."

"And deserved fame it is," Meng Li said. "Given the inelegance of your writing brush, oh Honorable Food Taster."

The table, including the prince, erupted in laughter. Hong the Royal Food Taster glared at the faces around him.

"Laugh if you will. My rhetoric may be clumsy, but my tastebuds are as sure afoot as a Mongolian pony. This pork rib soup is exactly the same as that I've tasted at a small food stand at the Western Gate. The stand of old Master Ou-yang, whose ancestors brought their culinary secrets from beyond the deserts and steppes of the barbarians."

"Impossible," the prince said. "No one can reproduce the preparations of one master exactly. There are far too many ingredients, most of them secret, for one cook to exactly replicate the flavorings of another."

Food Taster Hong looked down at his bowl, almost with reverence. "Yes. It seems strange. But somehow it was done. I'll stake my reputation on that."

A gaunt old man with gray whiskers had been loitering near the bowls and vats of the sweating Fatty Pang. Impatience overcame him, and he clunked his walking stick on the varnished floors.

"Thief!" he yelled. "You and your worthless daughter have robbed me. Robbed me of the one talent that fended off starvation for my family." He waved his bony arms. "And now all my customers come here and don't bother to trek to the Gate of the Western Wind. You have no talent for cooking, Fatty Pang, you have merely stolen mine!"

With that he lifted his walking stick and swung it into the bubbling vats. Steaming water rushed everywhere, angry clouds billowed toward the rafters, earthen jars smashed into ten thousand pieces. Everyone was up and screaming, grabbing the old man, wrestling the enraged Fatty Pang.

"Enough!" the prince bellowed. "I will see you all tomorrow in my court."

With that he strode out, and his entourage followed at his heels. Food Taster Hong stared back morosely at his half-eaten bowl of noodles. Poet Meng Li had less tolerance for longing. He slipped a

bottle of millet wine in his pocket and whistled as he pushed his way through the crowds of the Taiying market.

Meng Li had already finished the bottle of millet wine and was scribbling away in his quarters when someone knocked at his door. A white-faced servant bowed before him.

"The prince is sick," the man said. "You must come at once."

Meng Li dropped his writing brush, leaving a gooey blob of ink on his scraped bamboo ledger. The courtiers were in hushed conference outside the prince's chamber.

"Poison," someone whispered.

"Where's the Food Taster?"

"He's disappeared."

Meng Li wasn't interested in joining in idle speculation. He went to the office of the magistrate of Taiying. The magistrate and his constables were preparing to depart. They strapped swords to their sides and buckled brass and leather across flowing red tunics.

"Ah, Poet Meng Li. Once again you arrive in time to join us in a night's excitement. We are on the way to arrest the man who poisoned the prince."

Meng Li bowed slightly and stayed a few yards behind as the constables wound through the narrow alleys of Taiying. They kicked in the doors of the Inn of the Marauding Swine. The place was empty. All the stools had been stacked atop one another against the walls and the round dining tables looked like forlorn mushrooms. The light of an oil lamp flickered in the kitchen. Poet Meng Li stayed closed to the magistrate as he burst through the kitchen door.

Fatty Pang lay on the floor, his face contorted in pain, a puddle of blood still moist beneath him. The handle of a paring knife stuck out from just beneath his ribs, and his hand clutched a tattered square of silk.

The magistrate checked his pulse in the eight vital areas and slowly looked up. "He's dead."

Meng Li took the silk out of Fatty Pang's hand.

"What is it?" the magistrate asked.

"Strange. Not a letter or a verse from the *Book of Odes* but merely a list of foodstuffs, and beside them various measurements."

The magistrate wasn't interested in the least. He stood up. One of his constables called, and they strode into the dining hall.

A tall woman, her hair hanging loose and falling in front of her face, struggled to free herself from the grasp of the constables. Meng Li recognized her as the woman who had served them this afternoon.

"My father! I must see my father!"

The magistrate placed himself in front of her, hands on his hips. "You will. But first you must tell me who hated him."

She looked at him, her brow wrinkling. "Hated him? No one hated him." An awareness came into her eyes and she dropped her head. Her voice came out small. "Only the stall owner from the Gate of the Western Wind."

"What? Speak up."

She looked at him, glaring. "The stall owner from the Gate of the West Wind. He thought my father had stolen the secrets for curing pork that his family had brought with them from the barbarian countries beyond the deserts and the steppes. He was in here today and embarrassed us in front of the prince." She looked at the poet. "He was here."

Meng Li nodded to the magistrate.

"Was this man close enough to the food served to the prince," he asked, "that he might have poisoned it?"

The girl said nothing. Meng Li searched his memory.

"It could have been him."

"What is his name?"

"Master Ou-yang," the girl said.

The magistrate barked an order. The constables freed the girl, and she ran into the kitchen.

Blocks away, in the dark alleys, Meng Li could still hear her screams.

The constables were in a great rush now and trotted through the streets, the magistrate in the lead. Meng Li, despite his desire for any sort of diversion, began to pant heavily and finally gave up. Too much soft living in the palaces of the royalty of the Five Kingdoms. As he walked back to the palace, he consoled himself with the thought that he'd seen much this evening that would form exotic embellishments to his poetry.

Before dawn, Meng Li had washed his face and a hot cup of tea sat on his writing desk. The wooden shutters were open, and a cold mist from the royal garden swept across the warm flesh of his brow. He breathed deeply, dipped his brush into the freshly mixed ink,



and stroked another character onto the slowly growing poem of death and hatred.

A knocking came on his door. Meng Li cursed. He'd need a new poem to read at the feast of celebration once the prince recovered. Whoever had poisoned him had been rather inept. The physicians predicted he'd be his robust self once again after only two or three days of discomfort from the disease known as "water leaping from the body."

Meng Li opened the door. On her knees before him, her forehead touching the floor, lay the daughter of the deceased Fatty Pang.

"Rise and enter, young woman," Meng Li said, "and tell me what brings you to my quarters this early in the morning."

Meng Li offered her a stool, and they sat facing one another. In spite of her loose-fitting tunic and trousers, Meng Li couldn't help noticing the supple contours of the husky girl's body. She fidgeted beneath his gaze and started her story.

"I am Kuei-lan and, as you know, the daughter of the cruelly murdered Restaurant Owner Pang."

Meng Li hated preamble. Get on with the story, he thought.

"Master Ou-yang, the owner of the food stall at the Gate of the Western Wind, was arrested for my father's murder last night. I've already been to the office of the constabulary. They say he's confessed to everything, including poisoning the prince." The girl leaned forward, clasping her hands. "The reason I'm here, good Poet Meng Li, is because I don't believe he killed my father."

"But he's admitted to the deed."

"Everyone who is arrested confesses. If they didn't, the magistrate would lose face and it would go very hard on them."

Meng Li thought of the ingenious torture devices he'd seen in the various royal dungeons throughout the Five Kingdoms.

"You're right, Kuei-lan, but all the evidence points towards the guilt of the man known as Master Ou-yang."

"Let me tell you what led to this. My father was wise enough to sell all the farmland he had inherited before the invasion of Han by Chin. We took our profits and fled here to Taiying in the Kingdom of Ch'u. We had money and lived comfortably enough, but my mother died shortly after our arrival and, although she was only a woman, my father loved her so that he spent much of his wealth on her funeral."

Quite unseemly, Meng Li thought, but kept it to himself.

"We had enough money to last us a few years, but one day it would run out and my father had no sons, only this worthless daughter you see before you. He decided we must go into business. But what sort of business? Every entrepreneurial niche in the city of Taiying seemed to be occupied. My father was a practical man. He wanted to take an idea that had already been proved to be a commercial success and build on that idea using the capital he had which was superior to many of the fledgling merchants in the city. He heard of a food stall at the Gate of the Western Wind. People were flocking to it because of the skill of the owner, Master Ou-yang, and his family. Everyone in the city of Taiying agreed that their pork rib noodles were beyond compare. The operation was no more than a canvas awning propped against the gate wall, but still people flocked to it. How much better, my father thought, if he built a fine restaurant for Master Ou-yang. Wouldn't they be able to serve more customers and make more money? My father thought that one restaurant in Taiying might not be enough. Maybe he'd open two, and then another in a different city. These were his grand thoughts when he approached Master Ou-yang, but the old man was cagey and would allow no one access to the culinary secrets that had been handed down in his family through the generations. And he wanted to share none of the profits.

"My father was upset but decided not to give up on his idea. He forced me to pose as a foundling and dressed me in rags and kept me outside for many days until I was covered with grime. At his instruction, I presented myself to the wife of Master Ou-yang late one night and instead of begging for food offered to help with their cleanup in exchange for a morsel to eat. The woman accepted, and for the first few days I worked for them and slept outside their tent on the cold ground. Later the woman took me to the bathhouse and then brought me into their tent as a member of their family.

"I worked hard and learned every detail of Master Ou-yang's operation. The long curing of the pork in a golden honey glaze was the first step, and then marinating in an elaborate concoction. His portions were ladled by hand or by spoon but were always precise. I memorized everything.

"After a year the day came for me to flee. It hurt me not to say goodbye to the kind woman who had taken me in as her own child, but such were my father's orders. I returned to our home where he made me recite everything in the preparatory steps while he wrote them down and calculated precise measurements. When we opened

the Inn of the Marauding Swine, people recognized the flavor and flocked to our establishment from the opening day."

"What you've described, Kuei-lan, is a perfect motive for murder."

"Yes. But I know Master Ou-yang. He was always kind to me. He wasn't even able to slaughter pigs. His wife had to do it. He was angry, yes. But it's not possible that he killed my father."

"And there's also the subject of who poisoned the prince. That would've been the perfect way for Master Ou-yang to put your father out of business."

"But if he were planning on killing my father, why would he bring attention to himself by poisoning royalty?"

Meng Li rubbed his chin. "That's true."

"Besides, I know who poisoned the prince."

Meng Li looked at her with a start. "Who?"

"I did." She crossed her legs coyly, a move Meng Li had never before seen a woman make but an enchanting one nevertheless.

"The family of Master Ou-yang were starving," she said. "I couldn't bear to see it happen. It wasn't the prince I intended to poison but that man who visits all the restaurants in Taiying and writes letters informing the wealthy of their merits. It was only a little curdled pig's blood. I thought if he became sick in our restaurant he would squeal about it and our business would drop off. My father would be out of business, and Master Ou-yang's family would be prosperous again."

"Not the perfect attitude for a filial daughter."

She bowed her head. "My father and I often didn't get along." She looked back at Meng Li. "When I gave the bowl with the tainted pork to that fat food expert, he only tasted it and switched with the prince."

Meng Li grabbed his knees and rolled back laughing. "That must have been quite a shock to you."

Kuei-lan pouted. "It certainly was."

"If this comes out, you might be executed."

"The prince is an honest man. If he knows the whole story, I am sure he will show mercy. That night I told my father what had happened. He was in a rage and slapped me one too many times. I walked out into the night and wandered through the city for I don't know how long. When I came back, you and the constables were there."

"You're taking quite a risk, admitting to the poisoning of a prince."

"Yes. But I can't let Master Ou-yang and his family suffer unjustly."

"If Master Ou-yang didn't kill your father, then who did?"

"I don't know. That's what I want you to find out."

"But I am a mere poet. What can I do?"

"You know everyone involved. You can talk to them. And I've found out about your poetry. It's considered the best in the Five Kingdoms. Certainly a man of your talents will have no trouble reading the hearts of men."

Meng Li chuckled at the compliment. How gullible people were to believe in a reputation he had built by years of careful planning. His goal in poetry, as in everything, was profit.

"You've convinced me, Kuei-lan, that I am the man for the job. But why should I do it?"

"I can pay you. I now have my father's money."

"You'll need that for his funeral."

"Yes. But I will have more. I am going to keep the restaurant operating."

"You? Still a child? By yourself?"

"I can do it." She sat up proudly and as she did it seemed that her waist became smaller and her hips became rounder.

"There is something else, Kuei-lan, besides money, that you could offer me."

Kuei-lan looked at him, innocent questioning in her eyes.

After she left, Meng Li didn't feel overly frustrated. The sturdy punch she had landed on his skull had been almost as exciting as what he originally had in mind.

He liked this Kuei-lan, and looking into the case would certainly prove interesting. He sat down at his writing desk and finished the poem in a rush.

**T**hat afternoon Meng Li strode through the city, enjoying having a reason for visiting the open air markets and talking to the sellers of cabbages and turnips.

He found that Fatty Pang had a good reputation with the vendors. He paid his bills on time, and no one had a cross word to say about him. On the contrary, they were disappointed that a good customer had left the world in such an untimely manner.

Meng Li told one old woman that Fatty Pang's daughter would now be running the Inn of the Marauding Swine.

She sniffed. "We'll see about that."

It took much questioning, but Meng Li finally found the family of Master Ou-yang amongst the clustered food stalls at the Gate of the Western Wind.

"Where was your husband last night during the Hour of the Rat?"

"Are you a magistrate?"

"No. Just a member of the court, seeking justice."

"Justice." She seemed to have something to say but stifled it. A wizened old woman, she was probably over forty, and her five children clutched her skirts. "He was here in our tent. I told the magistrate that, but he didn't pay attention."

"Did you know that your husband went yesterday to the Inn of the Marauding Swine?"

"Yes. I made him do it. That girl, with her trickery, had stolen our livelihood."

"What good did you expect to come of it?"

"Probably nothing. But it's hard to watch someone else grow rich on what you've worked so hard to perfect. It was a mistake. We have less today than we had yesterday."

"What will you do?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "What everyone does in these circumstances. Beg. Or die."

Meng Li wound his way back to the palace through a maze of shops and stone-walled dwellings.

By all accounts Master Ou-yang was a gentle man. Would he really take the risk of being arrested and letting his family starve just for the sake of revenge? Did he think that he would get away with it and that business would come back to his stall and he and his family would go on as before? Not after creating that scene at the Inn of the Marauding Swine and allowing everyone to see his rage. Certainly he couldn't have been that stupid.

Could Kuei-lan have grown tired of her father's abusive ways and decided to kill him? But if she had, would she have admitted to poisoning the prince? Never. She would have kept quiet and let Master Ou-yang keep his date with the executioner. How could it have been she?

Or Master Ou-yang's wife? With five children hanging around her neck. And she seemed smart. Certainly she wouldn't have sent

her husband to cause trouble on the day she was planning a murder. And having him arrested in her stead would do her no good. Not with five children to support.

Everyone that Meng Li had talked to expressed a liking for Fatty Pang. He seemed to have no enemies, except for Master Ou-yang. But if Ou-yang wasn't the killer, who was?

The events of the last few days ran through the poet's mind like the stanzas from a great epic of hatred and despair. He bumped into something.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

A street vendor looked up pop-eyed at him over a cart bubbling with beef guts. People stared. Meng Li bowed, flushed slightly, and hurried off. The seller of soup straightened his cart and wiped up some of the splashed broth.

"Dang poets," he said.

The truth had come to Meng Li in a rush. He knew now who had murdered Fatty Pang. And he had the proof.

Two days later, at the Banquet of Recovery, the toasts to the prince's health had been so numerous that Meng Li reckoned he had already downed thirty cups of millet beer.

The red-lacquered tables were laden with pheasant stuffed with herbs and baked in clay, dried strips of venison, stewed pads of bears' feet, sauteed green beans served with mushrooms and bamboo shoots, steaming bowls of boiled *bokchoy*, and dozens of other side dishes, but the prince had insisted that pig meat be left off the menu.

When the food was cleared, Meng Li rose from his seat.

"If Your Highness will permit me. Before the men of the flutes and strings and the ladies of the swirling drums come to entertain us, I would like to clear up two matters that have been troubling all of us here at the court of the King of Ch'u."

"What is that, good poet?" the prince said.

"I know who actually poisoned you, oh great prince."

Meng Li bowed, and a flurry of conversation erupted through the crowd.

"Silence! But we already have the culprit in custody, Meng Li. His head will roll tomorrow."

"I am afraid it wasn't he. Send in the girl!"

A guard opened the chamber door, and Kuei-lan rushed forward and threw herself in front of the prince.

"It was this woman who poisoned you, good prince. Her name is Kuei-lan, daughter of Fatty Pang."

Using all his rhetorical skills and carefully modulating the inflections of his voice so as to keep the interest of the crowd, Meng Li told the entire story. When he had finished, the prince nodded gravely.

"So the tainted noodles were not intended for me?"

"No, Your Highness."

"But that still leaves the question of who killed Fatty Pang."

Meng Li pulled out the tattered piece of silk cloth.

"This, good prince, is a list of foodstuffs, and written beside it are precise measurements. I took it from the clutches of the corpse of Fatty Pang. I have never seen anything like it myself."

"What has this got to do with the murder?"

"Everything, Your Highness. Although I have no culinary training, I do know something of art, and I know that those who are completely dedicated to art are consumed by the greatest passion known to man. The meaning of this listing can be explained by only one man in this room."

All eyes turned to Hong, the Royal Food Taster. His face had gone ashen white. Meng Li walked over and handed him the cloth.

"Tell us, Food Taster Hong. Tell us what crimes Fatty Pang was preparing to commit."

Meng Li returned to his seat and waited. The voice of Hong the Royal Food Taster started softly but soon filled the hall.

"Of course I was outraged. Who wouldn't be? As soon as I tasted the pork rib noodles at the Inn of the Marauding Swine, I knew it was an exact replica of the dish served by Master Ou-yang at the Gate of the Western Wind. Had they hired him to work in their kitchen? No. So how had they replicated a secret that came through a family for generation after generation across the deserts and the steppes from the land of the far-off barbarians? When I heard Ou-yang's accusations, I was shocked to the marrow of my bones. This was theft, but it was more than that.

"The preparation of food is a great art, and just as no two painters or no two poets or no two musicians are exactly alike, so every culinary family has a style all their own. This is what makes food delightful and what makes being a professional food taster fascinating work.

"But imagine, if you will, a world where the most popular food items are reproduced endlessly. Where you can't go to the food



stand of one family one day and the restaurant of another family another day. What if, instead of producing art, people just copied the art of others? It would not only be a boring world but a world not fit for human life. I had to put a stop to it.

"That night I returned to the Inn of the Marauding Swine. The front door was locked, so I let myself in through the rear. Fatty Pang was indignant at my accusations and had the temerity to tell me that as soon as he made enough money from this restaurant he would open another, and serve exactly the same food! I told him that was impossible. He couldn't cook in two places at once. Then he showed me the list of foodstuffs and told me how, through clandestine observations, he had managed to reproduce the proportions of herbs and spices used in the preparation of Master Ou-yang's famous pork rib noodles. He had written everything down step by step and had provided measurements. As long as a cook could read, he could exactly reproduce the culinary masterpiece that it had taken a family centuries to concoct!"

Food Taster Hong was standing now.

"It was more than a man should be expected to bear. I flew into a rage. We struggled. I wanted to destroy that recipe of the destruction of originality, but he wouldn't let me. I grabbed the first thing that came to hand, a paring knife, and I thrust it into him. I had no intention of killing him. This you must believe."

He looked around the room.

"I only wanted to stop this scourge of mediocrity before it enveloped the world. Surely, you can understand?"

Fascinated by the Food Taster's discourse, no one had noticed Kuei-lan inching forward. She picked up a set of silver chopsticks, charged forward like a tigress, and jammed them into the throat of Hong the Royal Food Taster. Blood squirted onto the red-lacquered table.

Everyone rose screaming and jostling to get to them. The guards pushed their way through and dragged Kuei-lan away.

The morning after Kuei-lan's head rolled, Poet Meng Li found himself strolling near the Gate of the Western Wind. He ordered a bowl of pork rib noodles and was served by Master Ou-yang, who didn't recognize him. The old cook and his five children were all elbows and flashing spoons trying to keep up with the insistent demands of the ravenous crowd.

Meng Li closed his eyes as he ate. The noodles were delicious, and the broth tasted like poetry.

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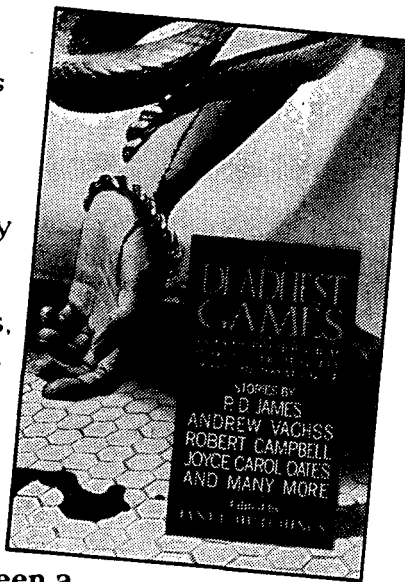
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FICTION



# Of Scandals and Skeletons

by Brenda Melton Burnham

*Illustration by Laurie Davis*

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**T**he Golden City *Courier* ran the story on the front page: "*Charlotte Jessup Hospitalized After Fall.*"

Granted, the *Courier* is not the New York *Times*. Still, they had good reasons for placing the story as they did. My aunt was ninety-two years old, she had not set foot outside the perimeter of her yard for nearly forty years, and no matter how many times her last name had changed, she was first and foremost a Cavanaugh. And Cavaughns are always news in Kern County.

At least they didn't mention the rumors. Or the scandals.

Naturally I knew about it before the *Courier* did. My phone rang at a quarter of four in the morning.

"Jane?"

"Lottie? What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's the silliest thing, really. I think I've broken my leg."

Mental acuity has never been one of the traits Lottie is known for, putting her on a par there with Cavanaugh males, I'm sorry to say. Three forty-five A.M. was not the time, however, to debate knowing or thinking that one had broken one's leg (although I certainly would have known and been able to say so clearly).

"Have you called the doctor?"

"Jane, uh, I wondered if you would come over and do that for me?"

Helpless people do exasperate me. But family is family, and Lottie was the last of her generation.

"I'll be right over," I assured her. I dressed quickly and drove the short distance to her house. Normally I would walk, but having had one leg shorter than the other since a childhood accident slows me down.

Lottie lived on the large, fenced property at the edge of Golden City that once belonged to her parents. I parked near the back door of the big two story frame house, took the key from its old hiding place, and let myself in.

"It's me—Jane," I called as I entered the hallway beyond the sunporch.

Neither I, nor anyone else besides Lottie to my knowledge, had been beyond that door for nearly forty years. I flicked on the light switch and halted in shock. The house had been filled with heavy, ornate furniture when I was a child, but now there was only a narrow path to the staircase. Stacks of newspapers, tin cans, and cereal boxes lined the walls. Metal dinette chairs, two plastic TV trays, and a stepladder, among other things, filled the entryway.

The fifth step still creaked, just as it had when I was a child.

"Who's there?" Lottie hol-lered.

"It's me," I yelled back. "Jane."

"Jane, is that you?"

"Yes," I called out as I reached the second floor and made the slight jog to the left to her room. Trash filled the hallway here as well.

She leaned against the far wall, a tiny bird-frail woman, her white hair loosened from its night braid. The telephone sat on the floor between her and the nightstand. Both her hands held a pistol pointed at me.

"Lottie, for god's sake. It's me, Jane."

The muzzle of the gun sank slowly and dropped onto the carpet.

"Thank heavens," she said and passed out.

By eight A.M. my brothers Harry and Arthur had joined me in the hospital corridor.

"Dr. Gorman says the hip is shattered," I explained. "They're replacing it now."

"Modern medicine is cer-tainly a miracle," Harry said.

"It's amazing what they can do nowadays," Arthur added.

"Ridiculous," I said. "Stain-less steel? Plastic? Other peo-ple's parts? I certainly don't in-

tend to have any of that done to me. I'll go out gracefully when my time comes, thank you very much."

"You're right there," Harry agreed. "Not for me either."

Arthur nodded.

"So what did the house look like?" Harry asked eagerly, our medical discussion terminated. "Does she still have the old pump organ?"

"I only went through the hall and straight upstairs. But I'd say she still has everything, and plenty more besides."

I stopped speaking as Dr. Gorman approached. Family business was not to be dis-cussed in front of others.

"She came through the sur-gery just fine," he assured us. "However, she's not a young woman..."

I snorted. Ninety-two? Of course she wasn't young.

"We'll have to see how she does. There is the possibility of a delayed reaction."

Preparing us. Didn't want anyone blaming it on him in the event she should die.

"Besides the damage to the hip Mrs. Jessup is suffering from malnutrition. It will take some time to stabilize that."

As if it were our fault she didn't eat right.

"What'll we do?" Harry said after the doctor had padded away in his floppy green slip-

pers. "Lottie has no children. There's only us."

"Who'll take care of her?" Arthur said.

They both looked at me.

"Plenty of time to work something out. She's not getting out of the hospital tomorrow, you know. Then there'll be the physical therapy. Besides, it's not as if Lottie is destitute."

"You're right, Jane," Harry said. "We can always hire someone."

"There's Mabel Thorndyke," Arthur said. "She took care of Uncle Wilbur, remember? And Marylou Cunningham. She used to be a nurse. . . ."

I went back to the hospital at two that afternoon. A soap opera blared on the television set high on the wall. Sunlight streamed through the window directly onto Lottie's face. Her head sagged, her mouth hung open, and snores issued forth periodically. I shut the door so no one in the hall could see her, turned the sound down, and closed the curtains. As I finished I noticed Lottie was watching me.

"They took my glasses," she informed me immediately. Lottie functions in only two modes: playful or whining. Both of them are childish. "And my teeth. And my hearing aid."

I opened the drawer of the metal cabinet and helped restore her to some kind of working order.

"This TV is terrible. You can't hear a thing."

"I turned it down."

"Good. Nothing decent on anyway."

She clicked the set off. We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I suppose I'm going to be here awhile?" she continued to stare at the blank screen on the opposite wall.

"I'd say so. Has the doctor been in to talk to you?"

"Silly man. Wanted to know what I'd been eating. 'I fell out of bed,' I said, 'not off the kitchen table.' 'Had I seen a doctor lately?' he asks. 'Certainly not,' I told him. 'If I had, would that have kept me from falling out of bed?'"

"What did he say?"

She picked at the sheet with her fingers. The nails were filthy; some were exceedingly long, several inches at least, while others were broken off at the quick. "He said it's possible. But what does he know?"

Since that didn't require a response, I didn't make one. Lottie's eyes closed, and her head eased back onto the pillow.

I had figured she had dropped off to sleep when, in a ragged voice, she began to sing. "Fair of hair and eyes of blue, pretti-

est maids I ever knew.' " She sat up abruptly. "Some fella wrote that about us. Lily and me. We knocked 'em all dead, we did. The Sugar and Spice Sisters, that's what they called us. She was Sugar, your mother was. And I was Spice. Naturally."

She giggled, her eyes darting about the room as if she could see her memories, like flickering images against the white hospital walls.

"My mother was a saint."

"Oh, she was that, all right. And I was the sinner. Which one of us had more fun, do you think?"

"Life isn't about fun," I responded stiffly. "It's about family. And honor. And duty."

Lottie's laughter finally ended in a series of rasping coughs. "You do remind me of your mother sometimes." As I was basking in the glow of this remark, she added, "Too bad you didn't inherit her looks."

The chair scraped along the floor as I stood.

"Oh, Jane, don't go getting all touchy on me. You know I love you just as you are." Once again there was the theatrical pause. "Besides, I wanted to ask a favor."

I waited.

"I worry about the house, sitting empty. Perhaps you could . . ."

She was going to ask me to check on it periodically. I would've done so anyway, whether she asked or not.

"... clean it up for me? I've been so busy, I've gotten a little behind."

"Do I look like household help? Just why would I want to clean your house?"

"Because you don't want strangers in there any more than I do."

I couldn't argue with that. Just watching the reactions of the paramedics as they struggled to move Lottie from her bedroom to the ambulance had been enough to make me cringe. No doubt already the gossip was spreading through town.

"And because you're as curious as anyone else about what it looks like now."

Certainly I was concerned about the condition of my grandparents' home.

"And because I can trust you."

I changed the subject. "What were you doing with a gun?"

Her triumphant smile disappeared. "A woman has to protect herself."

"You knew it was me, you'd just called me, remember?"

She glanced around, searching for the memory images that had temporarily abandoned her. "I was afraid."



"You've never been afraid of anything in your life."

"Things change."

"Like what?"

Her eyes searched the room again. "Someone has been prowling around."

"Kids," I said. "Did you call the police?"

She shook her head. "I yelled at them. 'Who is it?' I called and 'What do you want?' But they didn't answer."

"I'll take care of everything," I said.

She turned a beatific smile on me. "I knew you would," she said.

I turned to leave before she could annoy me further. As I reached for the door handle she called out, "Oh. And Jane . . ."

I stopped.

"Maybe you could put some food out on the porch for Scrapper's supper?"

I opened the door and left.

The first thing I did was to retrieve the gun that I had kicked under Lottie's bed before the paramedics arrived. As I expected, it was loaded. Cavanaugh males consider the killing of animals great sport, so all of us had learned about firearms at an early age.

I put the pistol in the drawer of the nightstand. If Lottie was right about intruders, it would be wise to keep it handy.

I hadn't planned to sleep in her bed, but it was impossible to step beyond the doorway of the other rooms. After changing the sheets and hanging my dresses, I went downstairs.

A practical method was needed to reestablish order. The kitchen seemed a place to start.

The wood stove was still in place along one wall, with a range dating from the forties alongside. Next to it sat a refrigerator of the same era. My grandmother's wooden table remained in the center of the room, covered with empty food tins, bread wrappers, oatmeal boxes, even an unopened package of mousetraps. One end was bare, the pattern on the oilcloth covering worn off from years of Lottie's eating there.

A large chest freezer dominated one end of the mud room, topped with stacks of newspapers and paper bags filled with what appeared to be trash. The pantry shelves overflowed with canned goods.

I called Hawkins Disposal Service and arranged to have a dumpster delivered the next morning, then cleared the table and tossed the oilcloth. Defrosted the refrigerator, dumped most of its contents, and decided the freezer could wait.

My grandmother had only used the parlor to entertain. Now the room was packed with furniture culled from other parts of the house. The Oriental rug coughed up a cloud of dust as I made my way to the oak hutch where the family pictures still sat on display.

Heavy ornate frames held memories intact: my grandparents on their wedding day, Lottie and my mother in their long white christening dresses, formal family shots.

Lottie was the elder by three years. Soft pale hair, big blue eyes, both sisters possessed the rounded figures that were so much more attractive than the consumptive look of today. But whereas Lillian, my mother, was calm and genteel, Lottie was wild and rebellious. She married at eighteen, a man "handsome enough to die for," she claimed.

The marriage lasted three years before he ran off with a seamstress and took up residence two counties away. Lottie was inconsolable. She went into a decline and sulked for nearly eighteen months before falling for a married man. In southwestern Kansas, in 1922, this was not considered "proper behavior," even if one were a Cavanaugh.

"Especially if one were a Cavanaugh," my mother would have said.

At twenty-five, Lottie remarried. John Tinker adored her and catered to her every whim, which gave the marriage a somewhat solid base, and the family began to relax. A scant eight years later Mr. Tinker drowned in the reservoir and Lottie was once again alone and devastated by her loss.

Meanwhile my mother had married my father—her third cousin and also a Cavanaugh (an "excellent marriage," everyone agreed)—and in time had my sister Irene and me. Everyone in Kern County knows the story of how my father hanged himself in 1929, only two days before I was born. After Mother's year of bereavement, she married his brother William and had my three brothers.

Lottie sashayed off to Kansas City in the late thirties, a move the family didn't try to discourage. In 1942, she returned to Golden City with her third husband, Warren. A handsome charmer some years younger than his bride, he claimed he had "ties" with all the big money people in Kansas City and Chicago and would allow a few of the locals "in on the action" if they had the funds.

But poor Lottie was not meant to be a happily married woman. Warren Jessup drove off one moonless night in 1952

in the couple's brand new Buick sedan with a satchel full of the foolish investors' money, and never showed his face in Kern County again.

That's when Lottie's "wild ways" began to change into what we in the family chose to call "erratic behavior." She was heard weeping in the garden by the neighbors late at night and calling out her first husband's name. She started wearing her mother's dresses, soft drapy things in pale colors, and let her hair grow long and unkempt. She arrived at destinations late and left early, drifting in and out like an errant summer breeze.

Finally she ceased to leave her yard altogether. Members of the family checked on her periodically until she took to not leaving her room when we arrived. She had her groceries delivered. Since May of 1953 no one had been beyond the sunporch, where a few of us visited rarely and then only when invited.

That is, until this morning.

A bout of sneezing brought me back to the present. I had spent too much time woolgathering, a trait I detest in others and seldom permit myself. I heated a can of soup for dinner, then dressed to go back to the hospital.

On my way out, I realized I hadn't put out a dish for Scrapper, nor in all Lottie's supplies did I find any dog food. I dumped some corned beef hash onto a chipped plate, put it on the steps of the sunporch, and left.

When the elevator doors opened on Lottie's floor I thought I'd walked into a party.

"Jane," my brother Harry's wife, Flora, called out. "Isn't it wonderful? All these people here to see Lottie."

"It's so good for her to know she's still loved," Arthur's wife Louella simpered.

"Thank heavens she's finally come out of that mausoleum," Gert Winthrop trumpeted as I tried to make my way through the crowd. "If you need someone to help you go through her things, Jane, my Peggy'd be glad to give you a hand."

I was sure of that. Her Peggy owned the fanciest antique shop in Golden City and never ceased in her efforts to fill it with Cavanaugh family heirlooms.

"Did you find anything, you know, interesting, in the house?" Mavis Turneau whispered two minutes before my nephew Teddy asked it right out.

"Did you find the treasure?"

"There is no treasure, for heaven's sake," I snapped, pressed beyond endurance. "Why do these silly rumors persist?"

"Well, you know," Mavis said, "with her third husband being a gangster and disappearing and all, right after taking those folks' money . . ."

"That's right," Teddy agreed eagerly. "And what about the insurance money from her second husband's death? How she was so grief-stricken she buried it in the yard and then couldn't remember where?"

"Yes," Gert chimed in. "And what about the gold bars she's supposed to be hoarding?"

"Warren Jessup was not a gangster. He was a silly little man with delusions of grandeur. And I'm sure the insurance money from John Tinker's drowning went right into a bank account where it belonged." The gold bars were too farfetched to bother refuting.

Mavis pursed her lips and flounced one shoulder as if she were still nineteen and teasing the boys. "That's not what I heard."

"People who listen to trash hear trash. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going in to see Lottie."

I needn't have bothered. She was holding court like royalty surrounded by awestruck peas-

ants. Vases of flowers filled the room with scent. Boxes of candy decorated the bedstand.

"Jane, dear," Lottie trilled. "Isn't this just so sweet, all these folks come to see little ole me?"

It was barely eight thirty when I pulled into Lottie's driveway again. I was exhausted, my head throbbed, the house sat in total darkness, and I had forgotten my flashlight. All I need now, I thought, is to be set upon by these monsters Lottie is so afraid of. Well, let them come.

As I reached out to put the key in the lock, a voice came from behind me.

"Evenin', Miz Cavanaugh. How's Lottie doin'?"

I stiffened and turned. Facing me was the largest man I had ever seen, a black man, dressed as if he were heading into the jungle for night patrol.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Scrapper, ma'am. Didn't Lottie tell you?"

I bent down to pick up the key but had trouble getting hold of it. When I finally got it in my hand, I clutched it tightly and returned to an erect position. "That's a ridiculous name for a man."

"My daddy called me that when I was just a pup, and I reckon it stuck. I'm sorry it bothers you."

"Why should it bother me? If you want to go around being called like a dog all your life, I guess it's your business."

"Then why are you so riled?"

"I am not riled. It's been a very long day, and I'm a little tired."

"I was just wonderin' how Lottie's doin'."

"Mrs. Jessup is doing fine, thank you. Please feel free to leave now."

He stared at me. "But I live here."

"Where?"

"Here." He waved one massive arm toward the old carriage house. "And I thank you for dinner, by the way."

**I** fixed coffee the next morning in my grandmother's kitchen, toasted a slice of dry bread, and sat down at the table to prepare for the day.

Normally I sleep very well. The fact that I hadn't done so the night before I blamed squarely on Charlotte Jessup. Not that it was the first time a Cavanaugh had lost sleep thanks to her.

As I ate my breakfast the big black man finished mowing the lawn and began to rake the cut grass into piles. When the truck from Hawkins Disposal pulled into the yard, he stopped what he was doing and directed them in placing the huge

dumpster near the back door. Then he went back to his rake.

I washed up my few dishes, poured another cup of coffee, and stepped outside. "Do you have an arrangement with Mrs. Jessup?"

The man stopped and looked my way. "Ma'am?"

"Does Mrs. Jessup pay you?"

"We have an arrangement, yes."

"Well, what is it?" Why Lottie tolerated such insolence I don't know.

"She pays me twenty-five dollars a week plus room and board."

"For yard work?"

"For whatever needs doin'."

"Mrs. Jessup said that someone had been prowling around. Is this true?"

"Young punks with nothin' better to do than go around scarin' women. Don't worry, ma'am. It won't happen again."

"It certainly won't, not while I'm here at least. I want you to know I'm very proficient with firearms."

"Yes, ma'am." He held up the rake and began to examine the tines as if something important lurked between them.

"Well, I suppose, since you live here, you'd better come in and get some breakfast. I don't intend to fix it for you."

While he rattled pots and pans in the kitchen, I went into the parlor to use the phone.

One thing you have to give the Cavanaugh men credit for: they're good with money. Arthur, as executor of Lottie's trust, assured me she was "in excellent shape, financially. She's only been drawing her monthly allowance—and not spending all of that—for years now."

"And there've been no large deposits or withdrawals?"

"None. The last time she asked for more money was, let me see, April of 1951."

As I hung up the phone I heard a car pull in. Hurrying into the hall I saw Gert Winthrop's Oldsmobile come to a stop.

"Oh no," I muttered.

Scrapper stepped out of the kitchen. "You don't want to see her, ma'am?"

"I don't want to see anyone."

"I'll take care of it."

He walked out, closing the screen carefully behind him, and was beside the front fender by the time Gert opened her car door.

"Miz Cavanaugh isn't receiving visitors."

"Don't be silly." Gert laughed. "I'm an old friend of the family."

"She's not seeing anyone," he repeated.

Gert tried to step around him. He moved slightly. She

stopped. He moved a fraction closer. She stepped back.

"Well, perhaps you could give her a message?"

"Be happy to, ma'am."

"Just tell her Gert Winthrop stopped by. Do you have that? Gert Winthrop. Tell her my Peggy'd be glad to come help her."

I went back to my phone calls. Normally I do not approve of petty gossip, but it is frequently an excellent source of information. I spoke with my sisters-in-law; two cousins; Mavis Turneau; Betty, who cleans Cavanaugh houses as her mother did before her; and Mabel Thorndyke, who had cared for several Cavanaughs in their dotage.

"They say she's been burying her money in the yard for years," Flora reported. "You can scarcely walk across the lawn for fear of falling into one of the holes she's dug."

"She always was an excellent swimmer," Mavis said. "Much better than John Tinker. And they were off at the quarry all alone. . . . I mean, of course I don't believe she drowned him or anything, but after all, he was insured for a bundle."

"She was devastated when John Tinker died," Flora said. "My mother told me someone had to be with her all the time for fear she'd do herself in."

"Her jewelry's worth a fortune," Louella claimed. "All gifts from men."

"You're probably too young to remember Simmons, the bootlegger," Mavis remarked. "It was well known that Lottie was having a fling with him."

Betty wouldn't say much, other than that Lottie had been "difficult to please" and yes, she had fought with Warren, but then, "she fought with everyone, didn't she?"

"I heard she had four abortions," one cousin asserted and the other swore up and down that Lottie had been delivered of a baby boy who was immediately put up for adoption.

Mabel Thorndyke couldn't remember whether it was Uncle Wilbur or Cousin Orrin who said Lottie had been a Communist. Or was it a Socialist?

I sat and contemplated the mass of conflicting information I had collected until I realized it was nearly lunchtime. When I opened the parlor door, it was to gaze upon a cleared hallway. As I headed for the kitchen, I saw Scrapper in the mud room starting to lift the lid of the old freezer.

"Stop!" I cried, rushing forward. By the time I reached his side he had the lid upright. Inside, under a heavy layer of frost, resided shrunken boxes of

frozen vegetables and fruit pies.

"Are you all right, Miz Cavanaugh?" the man asked.

"I'm fine."

"I better get you a chair. You're looking mighty pale."

I really didn't need the seat, but I took it anyway.

"Was you worried about the body?" he asked after handing me a glass of water I didn't really need either.

"What body?" I set the glass carefully on the floor beside my chair.

"The one I found under the rosebushes. You know, that poor rose bed hadn't been touched in years. Oh, here, ma'am, let me clean that up." He brought a towel and wiped up the spilled liquid.

"And when did you find this body?"

"Couple of weeks ago. Just bones, that's all. It'd been there a long time."

"I wasted a whole morning on the phone and you've known this all along? And didn't see fit to say anything?"

"Didn't know you was on the phone about a body."

"Don't be clever." Between Lottie and her hired man, my patience was being severely tried.

"No, ma'am. Reckon I figured it wasn't my place to be telling you nothin'."



"Not your place to report it to the police either, I take it?"

His jaw clenched. "No, ma'am."

"I see. Would you bring me another glass of water, please?" When he returned I said, "Betty mentioned she knows your mother."

He didn't respond. Betty had also mentioned, when I'd asked, that she knew Scrapper. "He was always a little strange, and after he come back from Vietnam, things got worse. Didn't like bein' around people, you know? Made him real nervous. Couldn't hold a regular job. His momma frets about him, but he's a good boy really. Just not like ever'body else."

"So what did you do about the body?" I asked.

"Covered it back up with dirt again. Said a few words over it first, though. Reckoned I owed him that."

"Him?"

He shrugged.

I took a deep breath. "That was very good of you . . . Scrapper."

"Yes, ma'am. Now, about Miz Jessup's stuff. I been tossing out the obvious junk and settin' everythin' else aside for you to look at . . . if that's all right?"

"That seems fine, thank you."

\*

I shooed away Lottie's collection of visitors that afternoon. When the last one had cleared out, I shut the door behind me and sat down beside the bed.

"You needn't bother to pout, Lottie. You and I have some serious business to discuss."

"Oh, la-di-dah. I don't believe in serious discussions." She tossed her head and reached for the television controls.

"I know about the body."

Her hand dropped back onto the sheet. She continued to look away from me.

"I figure it's Warren, is that right? What happened? Was the shame of his having cheated those people too much for you?"

That drew her gaze. "Shame?" She laughed. "Cheated? What people? If they were gullible enough to give him their money, they deserved to lose it."

"He was going to leave, wasn't he?"

Her attention drifted away again. "I was always attractive to men, you know." She picked at a broken-off fingernail. "But then . . . they would leave. They would always leave." A tear trailed a wrinkled path down her cheek.

"And was John Tinker going to leave?"

"John Tinker adored me," she responded indignantly.

"And I adored him. And what does he do? Up and drowns on me. He dived in . . . and he didn't come up. I dived and dived, ever so many times, but he was gone. Just gone." Another tear fell.

"But Warren was going to leave you?"

She shrugged.

"Was that why you killed him?"

Her laughter was back, in full force. "Lots of folks thought I did, all right. I let 'em think it, too. I knew they'd never charge me with it. No proof, just gossip. No, little Miss Smarty-pants, I didn't shoot Warren." One of her dramatic pauses. "Lily did."

"You're lying!"

"Oh no, I'm not. You're like everybody else where Lily's concerned. Only saw the surface."

"She was my mother." I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. "She was . . . good and kind and perfect. She would never . . ."

"She was having an affair with him."

"That's not true. She was married. She was a lady. She was far too . . . besides, she wasn't young . . ."

"What? You think women only do that when they're young? Poor Jane. You always were a prissy little thing, even

as a child. You want to know why she was having an affair with my husband? Because she'd married one turkey . . . sorry, dear, but your father wasn't worth the price of the rope he used to hang himself with. Because after your father died, she turned around and married his boring brother. Because yes, she was getting older, and that frightened her. Because maybe, after all those years, she was tired of being a lady and maybe she was just a little jealous of me.

"And probably because Warren was gorgeous. He may not have had any scruples, that's true. But oh my, he was fun."

I couldn't believe I was sitting here listening to this. I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, painfully. "If she was having an affair with him as you say, why would she shoot him?"

"She thought he was going to take her with him. She came to the house that night, all ready to run away. With her sister's husband." She paused. "I wasn't frightfully surprised, you know. Warren wasn't exactly the faithful type."

Lottie shook her head. "He laughed at her. It was terrible. Awful. Said he was leaving one sister, why should he drag the other one with him? Said he was going out to California

where there were real women. Beautiful women. *Young* women."

She dropped back against her pillow, exhausted by her revelations. "I don't blame Lily for shooting him. How dare he say a thing like that? To us? The Sugar and Spice Sisters?"

"So then what happened?" I asked when she had sat silent for a few minutes, her gaze focused somewhere between the blank television screen and the distant past.

"We dragged his body outside and buried it. The gardener had been there earlier in the week to work on the flowerbeds, so the ground had been turned once already. It still took us hours, it seemed like, to get the job done. We hid the Buick in Uncle Luther's barn for several weeks, then drove it across the state line and abandoned it." She rearranged the coverlet, smoothing it across her knees with age-ugly hands. "I was really sorry about that. I always liked that car."

"I don't believe a word of this, you know." I sat very erect in my little chair. "You're making it up to annoy me."

"I'm much too old to make things up any more. I don't have to; other people do that for me now. And I don't care if you believe me or not. Someone else might."

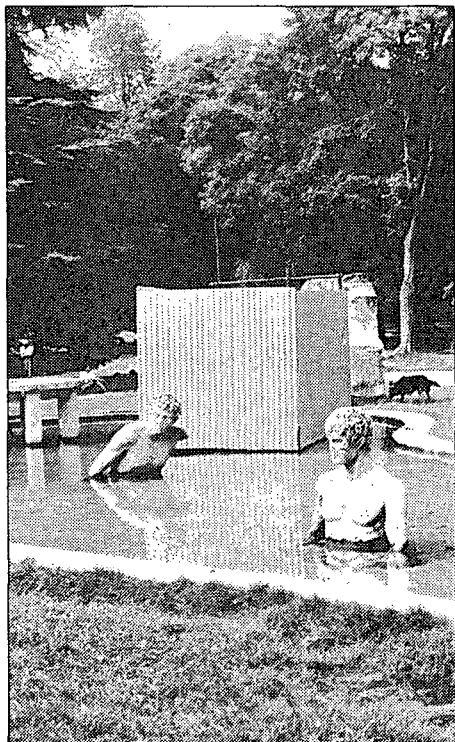
I gasped, a sound that perked her up immensely.

"Oh, don't be silly, Jane. It's so easy to get your dander up. I have no more intention of telling anyone about it than you do. It's much more fun leaving people guessing."

I found the satchel (Lottie couldn't remember where she'd hidden it), still nearly full of money, buried beneath the frozen vegetables in the old freezer. Lesser people might have taken comfort in that, but I hold to a different set of rules myself.

I gave half the money to Scrapper (who gave it to his mother) and the other half to the Kern County Historical Society, in my mother's name.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Maria Woodward*

Awesome. Cool. Heavy. Deep. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

**WE'RE GOING TO  
SING THIS SONG ALL  
NIGHT TODAY**  
by Dan Crawford



*Illustration by Jim Adams*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The bullets whined just overhead. We hunkered down in the mud to give them a little more room up there.

"Is this the biggest foxhole we can get?" demanded Velvet, smashing up against my left arm.

"The army doesn't make them for all-girl combos," I informed her.

Sissy gave us a pert nod. "I told you to call for reservations." A stray shot knocked off her helmet, severely disarranging the bow on top of her hair.

"Can't you guys shoot at somebody else?" screamed Olivia. "We're not the whole army!"

From a little rise of ground thirty yards off, Mona called, "Stay down! I'm coming over!"

"Fine!" I called back. "I'll just air out the sheets in the guest bedroom!"

"Cut!"

The bullets stopped popping. "What was wrong with that?" Velvet demanded, rising out of the mud.

Muscari looked offended. "Nothing," he said from his seat next to the camera. "But where's the stand-in? She's got to crawl down that line between the stakes while we set off the charges."

Carolina, sitting well away from bullets and mud, showed no signs of rushing to the front.

"I don't do stunts," she sniffed, brushing a little dirt from one knee.

"That's no stunt," said Elmer, our assistant director, hauling her out of her chair. "One of those topheavy dollies down there crawling through the mud, that would be a stunt. But we don't need a pair of trenches through our battlefield. All we need is you to crawl along that line there and not get too close to the stakes. We wouldn't want you to get blown up before this scene is in the can."

Carolina tossed him a look that should have melted him and then took Mona's place. At Muscari's signal, the bullets picked up again. The four of us in the foxhole assumed appropriately anxious expressions as the charges went off, sending mud and sometimes the stakes flying around the battlefield.

I could see, when the earth wasn't shaking, that Carolina's lips were moving. Stand-ins aren't permitted lines, and she wasn't the type I associated with prayers. I strained to listen.

I turned upstage so the camera wouldn't catch me gritting my teeth. Carolina was calling "Here, kitty, kitty! Here, kitty, kitty!"

We both knew Sissy's weakness. But surely Sissy couldn't hear it through the gunfire.

Sure she could. "Ooh!" she squealed, standing up right in the line of fire. "A kitty? Where is it? Don't shoot it!"

Muscari wasn't happy. In a second he was down in front of the foxhole telling us what he thought of glamor girls (not the exact term he used) who thought they were actresses but couldn't get through a plain, ordinary scene. "Now all the charges are going to have to be laid again, and God only knows how long that'll take!"

"But she saw a kitty!" Sissy tried to explain, pointing at Carolina. "Didn't you? Where was it? Is it all right?"

"There aren't any cats stupid enough to be around here," said Carolina, glaring in just indignation at our shortcomings. "Not four-legged ones. You're just trying to throw me off, with all this cat business."

"Why, you . . ." Olivia began, starting forward with arms outstretched and nails like bayonets set to maim and disfigure.

Muscari planted a hand in the middle of her chest and pushed back hard. "Listen. If you pin-up babes can't follow a script, we'll find somebody who can. If someone hadn't insisted on getting you guys with the big . . ."

"Someone insisted on getting you guys," said a gentle voice. Muscari's lips snapped shut.

"I was that someone," said Mona, stepping up to our cheery group. "I think I was, anyway. And I think I said something about not working this picture if I didn't get the cast I could work with."

"But Mona . . ." whined Muscari.

"But Mona?" she inquired.

He just shrugged and turned away. Before the Crash, Muscari'd been a housepainter, a professional boxer, and the owner of an art gallery. None of that prepared him for dealing with stars. Come the Depression, he had found work as a scene painter at Tel-Tab Studios and made the jump eventually to director. Tel-Tab is one of those studios where that isn't so big a jump.

"Okay, everybody!" he shouted. "Take fifteen! I want those charges rerigged so we can blow this cigar stand this week!"

The army regrouped, and the smoke of battle was replaced by more conventional fumes. "Got a cigarette?" Velvet asked Carolina.

"Yeah, and I have plans for it, too," Carolina said, turning a cold shoulder.

"Heh heh," said Elmer, who tries to keep us all jolly. "Is that any way to treat a screen star?"

Carolina sniffed again. "Screens, darling, are to keep



objects like her out of the house."

"I don't know why Carolina's being difficult," Mona whispered to us. "But I know she'll come around. Trust me. I do."

"Maybe she thinks she should've had one of our parts," said Olivia. "She's under contract at Tel-Tab, after all."

Mona clasped her hands. "I am so glad Mammoth Titan was able to lend you out for this picture. I would never have thought J. W. would be so liberal about giving you your freedom."

"He isn't," I told her. "He'd like to brand us, but then he'd have to feed us."

Mona laughed and moved on before I could tell her about the closet where J. W. keeps the branding irons. I shrugged and went over to where Boris and Jim were poring over a copy of *Esquire*.

"How could that khaki cling so tight?" Boris demanded. "It even goes into her belly button."

"Could be painted on," said Jim.

Boris shook his head slowly. "Don't see how she'd sit still for that."

"Well, she is a painting, too," Steve pointed out.

"Now that could explain it," Boris agreed.

Steve Raymond was the leading man in this picture while Boris was the main male comic relief. I'd worked with Steve before, but Boris was new to me, a big, burly man with a black beard. Maybe I'd have known him if he hadn't had to grow the beard for his role as Boris, a Russian anarchist who had turned war hero now that he was on our side. His lines were heavy on "Phooey," which was the only word in Russian the writers knew.

"That would mean the belly button is just a painting, too, right?" he said. Boris is a giant, but only physically. When not on screen, he spent most of his time making sheep's eyes at Mona, who was paying no attention at all. He had no scenes with her, being Sissy's main foil, but he obviously wished he had.

Neither he nor Steve Raymond noticed us going by, but Jim reached out to pat my backside as I passed. "Good job," he whispered. "We'll wreck this picture yet."

I sighed and nodded and moved out of the range of his hands.

Mammoth Titan Vital did not want this production to succeed, which was the real reason we'd been lent out. Theoretically, we don't have to take orders from J. W. or anyone at

Mammoth Titan. We're contracted on no more than a month-to-month basis to pose for pin-ups and mosey along sidewalks in city scenes. We can work anywhere any time anybody offers us a job. But we know that when J. W. whistles we've got to come running to Mammoth Titan or maybe J. W. won't whistle in our direction any more. At J. W.'s little playground, see, the money's not good, and the pictures are worse. But since he's really got nobody, there's always the chance of maybe moving up and becoming Somebody.

Mona Banks had unknowingly helped the cause of the Fifth Columnists by asking for us personally. The first day on the set, she told us seven times she couldn't tell us how happy she was that we could come. We'd never gotten a decent break at Mammoth Titan, but she was going to see that we got one. To go on with the effort to make sure *Way Over There* with Mona Banks and Steve Raymond never hit the theaters, I had to concentrate on everything Laszlo said J. W. was promising us.

Of course, we could do both Mona and J. W. a favor by seeing to it that Carolina fell in a hole. "I knew she'd be like that," I said, lighting the cigarette Velvet had bummed from

Olivia. "Dimples like that always mean fangs underneath."

Velvet blew out a cloud of smoke. "She wanted Mona's part. Can't blame her, poor thing. She must be around thirty."

"Yeah, second time around," Olivia said. "The nerve! Treating us like mere pin-ups! And after all the crowd scenes we've starred in!"

We'd actually done better since Pearl Harbor. So many of the men being drawn off meant we had to fill in the empty spaces on the production schedule. Of course, a lot of our shows had been those Broomstick Brigade pictures, where we wound up marching around carrying the flags of the occupied nations. Or those morale boosters that showed us waiting for the boys to come home, standing at the doors of our cottages wearing a diaphanous nightgown and holding up an apple pie, knowing he'd go for the pie first.

For this feature, Sissy, Velvet, Olivia, and I were this all-girl combo in sequins and see-throughs. (I directed, though not with the baton I carried in one hand. We don't get hired for our hands.) We met Mona, a general's wife, on a USO tour and complained about how our men were all away, stomping Schickelgruber and assorted

minions. Mrs. General acted as a fairy godmother, pulling strings and filling out forms instead of waving a wand, and got us overseas.

It was a big picture for us. Mona got all the wise faces and motherly dialogue, as well as the clinch when she was reconciled with her own husband, and the big moral at the end about how women should stay home and play their part in the war by leaving the men to do the real work. But most of the good stuff before that was ours.

So we had to decide. Did we do what J. W. wanted and assure ourselves a nice, steady ride on the merry-go-round? Or did we go for the brass ring by playing along with Mona, always taking the chance that the war might be over by the end of 1943 and the picture would go nowhere?

"You ready?"

Elmer's hand slid right along where Jim's had been. Sometimes these guys get confused about whether they've hired a hooper or a hooker. Sometimes they get us confused about it, too.

"Now, we're gonna take it from . . ." He had to retrieve his hand to flip through the pages on his clipboard. "From right here, where you throw out your fist and shake your chest . . ." He peered through thick

glasses at the script. "That can't be right."

"You've never seen one of our movies before, have you?" demanded Olivia.

"Isn't that the scene where we bounce into the tent?" said Velvet.

"What're you talking about?" Elmer demanded. "That's over on three. We're nowhere near that bit. This is the one we were just doing, with the bullets and the shells."

I snapped my fingers. "That's right! The one where we get off the boat!"

"No, no, no!" said Elmer, turning red. "The foxhole! The foxhole!"

"Why does it have to be a foxhole?" Sissy demanded. "I thought bunnies lived in holes."

"Oh, the battlefield scene!" I said, before Sissy could move on to the subject of kitties, and remind anyone of a grievance.

"Oh, right!" cried Olivia. "How could we be so dumb?"

"It probably comes natural," muttered Elmer, moving over to Steve Raymond's little literary society.

It didn't; we had to work at it. And we were getting tired of playing dumb. Why should we scuttle our reputation just to oblige J. W. and his whole damn family?

Mammoth Titan Vital is owned by J. W. and J. C., with their sons B. N., T. K., C. M., T. J., and Ted. (No one has ever explained why Ted doesn't rate initials.) Other relatives fill lesser posts, including Laszlo, with the Publicity Department. Laszlo said once, under the influence of lighter fluid or whatever it is he drinks, that Mammoth Titan could buy some real talent for the price of the brass nameplates on the desks of vice-presidents. Laszlo still has a job because he wasn't talking to anybody important at the time. Just me.

Son Number One, B. N., was married to Mona Banks for about fourteen months. That was the real reason J. W. and Laszlo were going to all this trouble, sending out four of their most dependable chests, as well as Jim, a publicity photographer, to be sure this celluloid masterpiece was reduced to scrap.

We took our places. Bullets whined again, Mona announced her intention of coming to visit, and Carolina started through the mud again. It seemed to me she wasn't crawling quite as straight as she had been, but not all Carolina's cigarettes are filled with tobacco. Still, the stakes that marked where the charges

were waiting were big enough to keep her on the right course.

She was halfway to our shelter when Elmer jumped up. "Hey! Hey! Hey!"

"Cut!" wailed Muscari at the same time. "Cut! Who the hell moved the . . ."

Our foxhole shook, and we all stared at the spot where Carolina had been.

"Stake?" he finished, shoulders sagging.

We did find most of Carolina not far away, but not nearly enough to really cheer us up. You might not've known we were depressed from the noises we made, though, after nightfall.

"Yick. Do you have to serve beans every night?"

"Beans are very healthy."

"Healthier than the people who eat 'em."

"Listen, bud, your last picture was so bad the government decided not to ask for the amusement tax."

"Hey, the critics were eye-to-eye on that picture."

"I know. They couldn't look at the screen."

"I could've passed up this jinxed picture. I had a very attractive offer from M-G-M."

"What? Tom and Jerry looking for stand-ins?"

But this is the way we pass the time of day. If you feel crummy, act like you don't care, acting being your trade. A little therapeutic grumbling; with a prescription of abuse of your fellow stars on the side, is supposed to make you feel a lot better.

It wasn't really working very well. You saw people studying their plates of beans, which are never a real morale-booster when you're on location. But it kept us from looking back over our shoulders to the blood-splattered battleground.

Did we miss Carolina? Not especially, but we made sounds as if we did, and for people in our profession it often comes to the same thing. A few of us even convinced ourselves that we'd lost our best buddy.

"So she pretended she was a big deal," Sissy sniffed. "So what? We all do that. You have to blow your own nose in this town to get anywhere."

"You mean horn your own nose, dear, but I know what you mean," said Mona, sitting beside her. "We'll miss the way she... miss the way she... we'll miss her now that she's gone away."

"Which way?" Sissy looked honestly interested. I left them to it.

Jim was over with Steve Raymond, reading one of the

newspapers they'd brought back from Silverstrike after they were done escorting the bits of Carolina to town. "Why don't the navy just sail right into Tokyo?" Jim demanded. "There's just a lot of water between here and there."

"Jim!" I whispered.

"Well, you gotta consider the stragedy," Steve told him. A clean-cut youth a month short of his eighteenth birthday, Steve Raymond would have been the hero's earnest young sidekick in happier times. But with much of the male populace of our little town otherwise occupied, he'd been promoted to the rugged leading man types. For the past year he'd seen more combat than a divorce lawyer.

Presumably this gave him the experience necessary to spell out the plans of the Allies. "After all," he told Jim, "there's Jap ships out there, too."

"Hey, Jim," I called.

"I suppose they got 'em all lined up so we can't sneak through at night," Jim sneered. "There's lots of ocean out there, you know. I've seen it." Jim has been to the beach.

Subtlety was not getting me anywhere. "Jim," I said, thumping him on one shoulder, "I want to talk." When he didn't turn around, I added, "About who killed Carolina."

"Okay," said Jim, having heard not a word. "And another thing I'd do if I had a navy . . ."

Anytime there's a death with any mystery to it in southern California, Jim is one of the first on the scene, often with a studio camera. And if he knows anything about the people involved (and everybody knows everybody around here, admit it or not), he volunteers to give the police the benefit of his thinking. The police have so far failed to see the benefit of this. Now I guess he was expanding to greater things than one-on-one murder.

"Oh yes," Steve was telling him. "Oh, sure. You're going to hide a dozen carriers from the Jap air force, huh?"

"Sure," Jim told him. "Remember that camouflage paint they used in *Oceana Roll*? Our prop department could make that stuff for the real navy."

"Jim," I said. "You said that boulder that came down and just missed Carolina wasn't an accident. Remember? And you didn't know how that camera caught fire just while she was standing by it. I think we're talking about real sabotage."

That finally got his attention. "That's it!" he shouted, taking me by the shoulders. "You're right! You've got it!"

"Don't shake it out of me," I said. "We have to . . ."

"Absolutely!" He let go of me and turned back to Steve. "We've got to send over a bunch of commandos to sabotage their stuff so the planes can't take off. You know, like in *Over There Again*. And while they're fixing their air force, we send in the carriers."

I tucked my tongue up behind my front teeth and tried to think of something biting to say. It didn't occur to me. I don't write the scripts; I just read them.

I wished I had a script to read that moment so I could check ahead and make sure we all lived happily ever after. In fact, we had no idea how that boulder came down or how that camera burst into flames. They could have been accidents. But Muscari had personally supervised the laying of the charges, and later he and Elmer had studied camera angles to make sure the audience wouldn't see a piece of wood painted red wherever a shell was going to hit. The missing stake could not have been an accident. Someone had removed it on purpose.

And I really, really wanted to know who had done that. Everybody plays jokes during a production, okay, and sometimes they go wrong. But I knew at least five of us were here to play serious ones and

shut down the shooting. It would be nice to know we weren't responsible for this one, that none of us five was a murderer. I have had friends commit murder before; it spoils my weekends.

So this one time that I desperately wanted to know who was the killer in the crowd, Jim was busy playing Admiral Nimitz.

I looked around the location. The after-supper discussion groups had split along the usual lines. On this side was the "war talk" crowd, on that the "I'm sick of all this war talk" crowd. Each group was further divided into smaller companies: radio/non-radio, sleeping together/not yet sleeping together, crew/working stiffs.

Elmer was nearby, along the fringe of the non-war talk circle, talking to Boris and a couple of extra soldiers. He'd have had an eye on the scene all through the accident; he'd know if the explosion got on film. Maybe he could tell me whether Carolina got farther in the second take than in the first. If not, we couldn't have done it; she'd been killed by one of the charges that had been reset while Velvet, Olivia, Sissy, and I were talking. If she'd gotten farther, though, it was a charge that had been set ear-

lier, and we couldn't alibi each other.

I came up behind Elmer. "I'll never get the money now," he was telling Boris. "But many people will figure it's bad luck not to pay up and everybody else will come across."

"Can I talk to you over here?" I said, tapping him on the shoulder.

"No problem." I had known it wouldn't be. Elmer is one of those cheery souls who likes the people around him to be happy. If you're not happy, he can, for a fee, supply whatever it is you need to be happy, or tell you where to go for it. He deals in happiness of the animal, vegetable, or mineral varieties, legal or illegal, profound or profane.

"Listen," I whispered as we strolled away from the group, "I'm worrying about Carolina."

He looked over his glasses at me. "Nothing to worry about. She's dead. Frankly, this is the first time I've stopped worrying about her since we got out here."

"Well, maybe not worrying exactly," I told him. "I just wanted to find out where she was when the explosion went off. We're thinking of putting up a monument."

He set his hands on his hips. "That's going to look great in



the middle of our battlefield shots."

"Not a tall one," I said. "Kind of a plaque, you know, that would lie flat on the ground, just to mark the spot. You could cover it over during shooting."

A real actress could have sold him on the concept. The best I could do was convince him I was serious. He shrugged; not his business to judge a customer's crazy ideas. "Okay. So what did you want from me?"

"Well, see, I want to put the plaque right where she was when she . . . found out she was in the wrong place. Did you see how far she got? Or did they get it on film?"

He tossed his head back and laughed. "Oh, is that what this is all about?" An arm slid around my waist. "No need to beat about the bush, kid. I've got a waiting list as long as your leg of people who want prints of Carolina getting hers. Two hundred bucks, and you can't have it until we get back to town." His hand sort of slid up. "But that price is negotiable."

One thing about these guys who can get it for you wholesale is that once they think they've got something figured out, you can't budge them. So I didn't push the point. "I'll think about

it," I said. "Two hundred's plenty of money."

"We got a couple of days to work it off. Check with you later, huh?" He gave me a little squeeze, not around the waist.

Meandering back to the group, we found Velvet sliding into Elmer's spot next to Boris. "Want me to help you do some pushups?" she asked. Boris just kind of grunted. Velvet snuggled up next to him. "It gets so chilly out here in spring, doesn't it?" He grunted again. Her jaw came forward a bit, but she held her position.

Velvet was trying to make as many friends as she could this year. The work hadn't been there lately. Producers want not only a chest that makes the men in the front row duck when you turn around, but a moist-eyed, dew-cheeked, Miss-America-next-door face. Innocence is not a look Velvet ever perfected.

The very thought made me look across at Sissy, who was now having a deep discussion with Mona Banks on the differences among kitties, cats, and kittycats. Sissy has the ultimate look of wide-eyed innocence, because she is in fact a wide-eyed innocent. She once sat through a night-long orgy at a producer's house, waiting patiently for them to serve the ice cream.

Elmer tapped a soldier on the shoulder, earning us a little room in the circle. "You know," he said, ushering me to my spot with two hands on my thighs, "One thing I will miss about the little bitch. She had connections I could never figure, and she could get stuff when I couldn't find it. If she'd just given up pretending to be an actress, we could've made beautiful music together."

"Not that one," rumbled Boris. His voice was deep, echoing, as was only right for something that came out of such a soundbox. "You should have heard her knocking herself out to get one of the combo girl parts. She did everything but read *Hamlet* standing on her head, and then she started to sing like somebody in a dentist's chair."

"How foolish!" said Velvet, surrounding it with her cultured and above-it-all laugh.

I assumed Boris had never heard Velvet sing. My own singing is just good enough to lead a slightly tipsy crowd in "God Bless America," which has never prevented me from finding myself in musicals. In fact, I'm a triple threat, since I can tap dance on a battleship, I have a scream that will make everyone in the balcony dive under the seats, and I am particularly expert at straining

against ropes in serials. (For this, I get fan mail from some of the oldest third-graders in the forty-eight states.) Despite these accomplishments, I am fully aware that I owe my steady employment to my willingness to take a cream pie in the cleavage. Carolina had simply presented a smaller target.

"Before that she was trying to get Miss Banks' job," Boris went on. "I didn't know whether to laugh or get sick."

He seemed to know an awful lot about it, for an extra. But some guys always seem to have their ears against the wall at the right time. I hadn't heard much about Boris myself. I knew the face well enough to nod to it; we had probably been in the background of some fire scene or shooting scene where they needed people to stand openmouthed. It did seem strange that there was no solid gossip about him. You heard whispers of a dark, secret past, but those went around about anybody whose bedroom and bathroom habits hadn't been spelled out in the papers yet.

For all any of us cared, he might really be an ex-Bolshevik bomber like the one he was playing. We didn't really care. Only Velvet seemed to feel he had anything. It was obvious to the rest of us in the circle that Boris felt she had nothing.

I couldn't see anyone else in the group who might have some idea where Carolina had been stopped. "I'll be back in a bit," I lied to Elmer, and got up to consider the crew's little coffee-klatsch. This was almost enough to convince me I didn't care who'd killed Carolina. No Woman's Land held as many terrors as our minefield; the cameramen had a lot of energy for a bunch of 4E's, and plenty of alcohol, much of it homemade.

Moving slowly in the direction of the party, I went past Jim and Steve's circle. "No," Jim was saying, "Congress is right. MacArthur needs tools to fix those Japs."

"There's more than Japs in this thing, you know," Steve told him.

"That's the problem!" Jim informed him. "The big brass is all out east, so they're all haywire about the Nazis. It isn't like the Nazis are close enough to start shooting up Miami or Manhattan. But we know the Japs could bomb California right into the ocean."

"It could use a bath," I said. I stepped between them and put a foot on the newspaper they'd set down so it would stay down. Maybe I was concentrating on the wrong front myself. "Does either of you know what

Carolina owed Elmer money for?"

Jim shrugged. "Probably, um, some pills or other," Steve told me. "I don't know what-all she takes . . . was taking. My sister used to go around with her and her friends, but I didn't pay much attention."

"Why don't you talk to Olivia?" said Jim, whacking his forehead on my knee as he tried to retrieve the paper. "She's asking everybody about Carolina, too. You can work on the picture of her life together and fight over who gets to play the lead."

"Loser stars," Steve noted.

I looked around for Olivia and spotted her moving off into darkness beyond our little circle of trailers. There was no one for her to ask in that direction. The closest person was our intrepid director himself, squatting in splendid isolation, chewing on an empty pipe. I could ask; he'd probably remember where Carolina was when the lights went out. I didn't believe I cared to tackle him. He really, really needed this picture. He and Mona Banks had made each other's careers, but though Mona had gone on to other triumphs with other directors, he had had a series of goose eggs like *Ragtime Violin* and *Alabama Moon*. Tel-Tab had offered him this pic-

ture with the stipulation that if he couldn't make as big a hit as Mona's *When Lights Are Low*, he was going to have to find another star to hitch his wagon to, and at another studio.

Shutting down shooting until they got another stand-in, which was the least he could expect, meant budget problems and smaller revenues. Shutting down the picture completely, which had been suggested, meant he was out of a job. So, on the whole, I felt I would not break in on his cheerful meditations. I hurried after Olivia.

I found her leaning on the rope and post fence that had quickly been erected to keep us off the battlefield. She was studying the shell craters.

"Where was she?" I asked.

She didn't turn around, "Back there, I'm pretty sure." She pointed to a large hole toward the middle of the war zone. "The first time, she got that far." She indicated a hole closer to where we'd been cowering.

"So none of us could have done it?" I said. "It was one of the charges that was reset while we were talking?"

She shrugged. "I don't know for sure. I'd have to see both takes on film. And do you know what Elmer wants for all that celluloid?"

"Well, he was talking about two hundred smackers, but I don't believe that's really what he wants."

"Anyway, it could still have been Jim," she told me.

I'd forgotten about that. "But our assignment was just to make trouble," I said. "Not to do anything that dangerous. Jim wouldn't..."

"Maybe Jim didn't know she'd get that close," she said. "Anybody could have done it. Maybe Sissy picked up a piece of wood, thinking someone would trip over it."

I nodded. It could have happened that way.

"And Velvet would do anything."

She was polite enough not to ask what I knew about the stake, and I returned the favor. If either of us had been inclined to confess to the other, we'd have done so by now.

"You're right about her getting too close," I noted. "She must not've been paying attention."

"She was supposed to be following a string," Olivia bounced one fist off the top rope. "I wonder if that didn't get moved, too."

"It'll be long gone," I said. "Even the police won't find it."

"Police?" She snorted. "From Silverstrike? They won't waste the gasoline to come out here."

As far as they're concerned, it was just another dumb actor and another dumb accident."

"So there's really no danger of our getting arrested."

"Nooooooo." She drew it out as though she had to think about it as it went by. "I'd still like to know what happened, though. If it wasn't one of us, it could be somebody who doesn't like me any more than he liked Carolina. You know how it goes: first you knock off obvious vermin like Carolina, but before you know it, you're killing anybody who doesn't cover her mouth when she sneezes."

"Habit-forming, huh?" I said. "I'll try to remember to cover my . . . Hey, hold it!"

She was holding the top rope so she could swing a leg over it. "I figure I can just count the stakes that are left and find out where she was. And maybe the anchor at one end of the string or another is still out there."

I caught at her waistband. "Are you crazy? How are you going to do that tap dance sequence with your legs blown off?"

"Don't be dumb," she told me. "Even if there are any live charges left, they won't go off unless somebody presses the button."

I was going to answer, but there was this loud noise and she landed on top of me. The

rope fence and about sixty percent of the battlefield landed on top of her.

““O oh!” sighed Sissy, shaking her hair out in back as

a breeze whistled past her. Being a thoroughly warm personality, Sissy has a tolerance for dawn breezes in the desert in the middle of April that far surpasses ours.

But civilization needs leg shots, and dramatic lighting is more important to a photograph than temperature. For that big news shot of us peeling off our nylons to help the war effort, we'd had to assemble on the front steps of J. W.'s building in the dead of January. April was easier; the teeth didn't clench so much when you smiled at the lens. And you could turn so the goosebumps were in shadow, the way Olivia was hiding the little scratches left by the explosion of the night before.

We were all looking into the sunrise anyhow, letting picturesque shadows develop across our features. I had sat for so many pictures gazing into sunrises or sunsets that my declining years will have to be spent asking my many millions of fans to guide my hand over their autograph books.

"Chin up just a . . . yeah," said Jim. "Look this way more, Vel . . . yeah. Hold it."

Below us, out of camerashot, illusion engineers were rigging a false bluff for the scene where Boris rescued the four foolish virgins from slaving Nazi storm troops by interposing himself between us and defilement. They weren't working so very hard on the bluff; a telegram was expected any second to tell us the studio was cutting its losses and calling us home.

Velvet was all for it. "We're living like gypsies out here," she complained as Jim changed plates. "They'll have us washing our clothes in the creek next. I'm sure it would only be a temporary delay while they get sets ready."

"It's a long way to temporary," Olivia noted. "We wouldn't be back."

"It's the only way to get anything done," I said. "You've got to keep going till they come make you stop."

"Tip your heads back, everybody," Jim ordered. "Close your eyes. Love that sunrise."

We obediently loved the sunrise while he snapped off another shot. "Just to the right, Olivia," said Jim. "I'm getting a little of that one stripe."

The picture was taken. "Who could have pushed that but-

ton?" Olivia demanded, stroking the new lines on her face.

"Nobody," I told her. "I checked. The control board was supposed to be locked up until morning."

"Who had keys?" she said.

"Everyone turn a little left. Sissy, your skirt's sliding down over your knee." Jim adjusted the position of his camera a quarter of an inch.

"Elmer, Muscari, and Cyrus," I said. Cyrus was our head techie, working for Tel-Tab instead of Uncle Sam because of a bum ticker.

"Muscari did it," Jim announced. "Hold that." He took the picture and went on, "That foreign name, you know."

"Yeah," I said. "Another enemy spy. Funny how these spies never change their names to Smith or something."

Jim nodded. "Your basic Axis sneak is a superstitious, cowardly, stupid man," he explained. "Otherwise he wouldn't be an enemy."

"Well, I think you should just confess," Velvet told me. "Think of the publicity."

"My parents were satisfied just to get their faces on the sheet music," I said. "Why don't you confess, and we'll back you up?"

"We ought to find out who really did it," Olivia pointed out. "At least J. W. is going to as-

sume we did it, since that's the kind of thing he sent us out to do."

Velvet shrugged. "So he'll be grateful."

"So grateful he'll sign us to seventy-five year slave contracts and hold it over our heads whenever he wants something out of us," Olivia replied.

"Hold it!" Jim called.

"The least we can do is call a halt to the sabotage," I said. "If we get caught at anything from here on, it would make us prime suspects for that."

"So you're sure we didn't do it, huh?" demanded Velvet.

"Well, I didn't," Olivia said with a toss of her head. "And I don't believe you'd have risked getting your knees dirty just to pull out a stake."

"Steak?" Sissy demanded. "All I had was beans for supper. What did Velvet do to get a steak?"

"Got her knees dirty," I said. "Never mind. Most of our sabotage was the fun kind, not the dangerous kind. Remember that shot during the combo scene, when Velvet's costume started to break?"

"That wasn't sabotage," snorted Olivia. "That was advertising."

"And how Elmer ran over to help her out?"

"All the way out," Jim noted. He adjusted the camera again. "And how he started yelling, 'Keep 'em flying?'"

Velvet smiled. It had been one of her better efforts. "That little reel of film is going for fifty dollars," she informed us.

"Huh," said Olivia. "Carolina beat you out, then."

Velvet frowned. Olivia explained. I could see in Velvet's eyes that she was trying to think of a way to top Carolina's price. "Never mind," I told her. "I'm sure you've got more expensive films than that."

Something about that really made her frown. "Elmer..." she started to say.

"Hey, you guys!" We looked over the brink to see the crew moving downhill into camp. "You guys!" Cyrus shouted again. "The old man wants to speech at us!"

We looked at each other. This was it, then.

"Rough on Muscari," said Jim, packing up his camera and tripod. "I hear he's getting over an affair with a script girl. She ran off with a stunt man."

"I know how he feels," said Olivia, brushing some grit from her skirt as she stood up. "Remember when I was going with Leo, and he broke it off?"

"Not the same," Jim said, the way men do.



"It is, though," she told him. "He also ran off with a stunt man."

We got down to camp and found no divisions now between stars, lesser cast, crew, war talk, or non-war talk. Everyone had one thing in mind. Some people had suitcases in hand.

Muscari was up on one of his directorial platforms with a megaphone. "I've gotten the telegram," he called. "The studio is going to leave the decision up to us, people. We can pack up and go home and forget about this picture."

A few of the younger employees cheered. In this business, you learn not to answer until the chief has finished his paragraph, though.

Our leader glowered. "This picture that our friend died for," he said, louder. "Or we can pull together, like the Allies, get the rest of the shooting done today, and blow this dust bowl. Can I count on a great effort?"

Now we all cheered, whether we felt like it or not. He obviously intended to stay, so the choice had really already been made. Also obviously, the four of us, with the help of Steve and Mona, could still change the decision. Muscari couldn't go on without allies.

But Mona was behind him on the platform, and backing him in other ways as well. Coming

forward, she called out, "After all, other people are making a great effort against worse odds. We're not even asking you to face Nazis; these explosives are being set up by your friends!"

A lot of people seemed to find this a telling point. Boris applauded with his hands over his head, and others joined in. There was no chance at all of escape now.

"All right, people," Muscari called. "I knew you'd take it the American way. Everybody assemble for the bluff business."

We moved off, preparing to assemble. Not everybody was unhappy about it. "This means we can go home tomorrow," Sissy pointed out.

"But we could have gone home today!" wailed Velvet.

"And that's even quicker," Sissy pointed out, with a nod that showed she was conscious of having won the argument. "And it's a good thing. There are bunnies for sale all over town, and I'm not there." She frowned. "Unless I should spend the money for stamps."

Olivia opened her mouth, but I shook my head. We'd already done our best. Sissy's mind had combined the constant admonitions to buy War Stamps and Bonds with ads by the stamp collector supply stores that it was patriotic to collect stamps. So every Friday Sissy went

down to the post office to get five hundred more of those purple eagle stamps, worrying all the way that they might run out before next payday.

The technical crew had mixed emotions, being willing to quit while acknowledging that they'd done a lot of work already that would be wasted. Their leader, Cyrus, urged them toward the latter idea. "Besides," he told them, "this is our chance to show them accidents weren't *our* fault."

"I'm in no hurry to get back to town," someone declared, catching up to us. "It's only when you've been behind the scenes that you can say you've seen the behind."

Sissy thought about this. "That's very clever," she said. She's thinking of becoming a writer, so she knows high wit when she hears it.

I know low wit when I feel it. "Don't start selling the scenic postcards yet," I told Elmer, rubbing the spot where his thumb and forefinger had met.

He came a little closer to help me rub it. "Speaking of scenes and behinds," he noted, "how about that deal?"

"How about that deal?"

We looked around to find that Mona was joining us. "I believe Mr. Muscari wanted to talk to you about rocks or dirt or something earthy," she told

Elmer, and nodded to let him know he was excused. Not at all offended, he gave me a parting pat and moved off.

"I'd be more careful who I went around with if I were you," Mona said to me. "Elmer isn't much to show around, and you're going to be more than bumps on the cover of a fan magazine. You're going to be a star; I've known it since that great job you did on *Tell Her in Springtime*."

Velvet lit a Kool. "The critics said she did a number on it."

"And Floyd . . . Mr. Muscari is just the man to guide your move to the top," she went on. "I'd hate to think you'd lost your chance because of a mere assistant director."

We were moving past Elmer at this point, he having stopped to answer some question of Boris's. The big man's eyes followed Mona as we moseyed. I slipped around to the other side of the group to keep out of Elmer's reach.

So I was the first to notice Steve Raymond discussing something with Jim, looking kind of grim. "Ever since the explosion killed Carolina, Steve's been kind of quiet," I noted.

"Kind of quiet," said Mona. "Do you remember Alexis?"

"Alexis?"

"Alexis Ramone," said Velvet, emitting a puff of smoke.

"Alexis Ramone," said Olivia. "Was she a relative of his?"

"A relative of his," Mona replied, nodding. "A sister. She died in that smash-up after Finniti's party six or five years ago."

"You remember," Velvet told me. "Lola Allan lost an arm in the crash, so I got her part in *The Japanese Sandman*?"

"Ye-es," I said. "Um, Carolina was part of that crowd, wasn't she?"

"Mona!" someone called.

"She drove," Mona said, looking around. "It was the other driver's fault, though, or so everybody said."

"Miss Banks!" We spotted Muscari in the tumult, waving his star over. She nodded to us and moved over to our fearless leader.

"Behind the scenes," murmured Sissy, who had found a piece of paper to write down this latest witticism. The rest of us studied Steve and Jim, still busy in earnest and serious discussion.

"Why don't you get to know our star a little better, Velvet?" Olivia asked. "Find out whether he had some grudge against Carolina. If he didn't you'll at least make a friend for later on."

Velvet took another long drag on the Kool. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "You'd kiss a hog for sausage."

Velvet emitted contempt in a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Bad investment anyway. Two months and he'll be in khaki. Anyway, five years is such an age difference."

"True," Olivia admitted. "That's about the difference between your age and the age you have on file, isn't it?"

All this time we had been moving toward our manmade mesa. A pair of ladders at different stages of collapse waited for us. There was a thrill in being allowed to use the same ladder Mona and Muscari used instead of taking the rickety crew and extras ladder. Of course, this meant we were going up ahead of Elmer. I pushed Sissy to the ladder first and followed her. Let Velvet come last, if Elmer was minded to bring up the rear.

The bluff went up about eight feet, which would be made to look like eight hundred on-screen. It wasn't a sheer drop but a gentle slope mined with those tidy charges that would toss dirt (and sometimes people) into the air. The idea was that as we were shelled by dirty Nazis who didn't know better than to toss

ammunition at the good girls, Boris would toss us over the edge to save us from the advancing troops. We would roll a bit, make hilarious remarks, and then dive for the foxhole we'd filmed yesterday.

We assembled in our places and made ready for the scene. Our faces were prepared and our costumes checked.

"Hey!" called Elmer, looking at a sheet on his clipboard. "In the shot before this, Boris had on a hat."

Boris shrugged. "Does it make a difference?"

We turned slowly, jaws sagging. This had to be the first time he'd ever been the center of a scene, maybe the first time he'd had any lines. Muscari was taking a deep breath, but before there was enough pressure for an explosion, a voice piped up. "If you don't have your hat on, people will wonder where it went, and they'll start looking for it on the ground instead of paying attention to what you're doing. And if a bunny should mump by while they're doing that, they'll think it's a bunny movie and forget all about you."

No one could doubt that Sissy was repeating exactly something someone had told her twenty years ago, when she was starring as Baby Cecile in a series of charming, forgetta-

ble silents. And who could be angry in the presence of Baby Cecile?

We all exhaled. Muscari laughed. "Back in '28, we made this avant-garde picture where the hero wore a black coat in every other shot, and a white one in the rest. The audience expected stuff like that. In this picture, they're expecting a beautiful woman and her four goofy friends, not a mad Russian with a disappearing hat."

"Or bunnies," Sissy added, holding Boris's hand. Sissy, at least, will never have to rely on her figure to get work. There will always be room somewhere for that smile.

The hat was found—Boris had put it on a chair and Mona was sitting on it—and we set to work. On cue, we good guys turned to stare at the charging German army, three-fourths of which would be supplied later in editing.

"I've never seen anything like it before!" I exclaimed.

"Huh!" Velvet replied. "You've never been outside Joe's Bar on a Saturday night."

"Phooey!" barked Boris, "Now you go!"

Olivia looked over the edge, dubious. "Maybe..."

"You go!" Boris repeated, and took hold of my shoulders.

Now, the way this was supposed to be done is the grabber

takes hold of the grabbee and makes a violent move as if tossing the grabbee down. The grabbee then does her own fall, and you cut to the next shot, which is of goofy friends of beautiful heroine bouncing in the dirt.

But as he had already demonstrated, Boris didn't know much about all this. And the muscles weren't makeup. I went flying over the precipice and hit the dirt hard enough to knock the wind out of my lungs and about six pounds of dirt into my eyes.

I shook my head to get the western front off my face and saw a red piece of wood not three inches from my nose. It wasn't a big piece of wood, but little things mean a lot to a woman, particularly one who has already seen what those explosive charges could do at this distance.

**T**hose who have never given it a try might think the idea of a few pounds of gunpowder going off in your face would give anybody get-up-and-go. But I had just fallen about six feet to land chest-first in the dirt. Even if I had been able to get my breath back after that, Boris had three more starlets to toss into this boobytrap. At

least two of them landed square on my back.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" Elmer was shouting. That had been Carolina's epitaph, too.

"Cut!" Muscari echoed. "Cut! What's the matter this time?"

I looked uphill to see Elmer shaking his clipboard over the edge of the bluff. "The charges are going off over here, but all the stakes are over there!"

Muscari joined him. "Cyrus!" he bellowed. "What's with this slope?"

There was shouting I couldn't make out. I rolled Velvet off of me and came around to a sitting position. Cyrus went up to his bosses, shaking a handful of crumpled paper. "Some damn idiot gave my boys sheets with half the map printed upside down!"

"I don't want to hear it!" Muscari answered, shoving a forefinger into Cyrus's chest. "Find out where the charges *are* so we can get this stuff done!"

Cyrus moved forward; he is impressed by no director. Not only has Tel-Tab certified him as a technical wizard, but he did time as a director himself in early talkie comedies. I was in some of those. Cyrus's motto was, "When in doubt, have someone hand the heroine a ten-pound block of ice."

So he was not afraid to come nose to nose with Muscari. "You just find out who printed half these maps wrong! My boys can't do the job if you feed 'em the wrong stuff!"

Muscari took a step back, nearly joining us downhill. "Well, we got the shot we needed there, so there's no harm done," he said, his voice milder. "But, Cyrus, you know you've got a lot of new kids working for you who don't know what to..."

"You can forget that," Cyrus said, moving forward. "I've taught them everything I know. Somebody else is screwing up this production, not my boys. I'm behind them all the way."

"Way behind, I hope," said Elmer, "if this is the way they operate."

Mona had come up the slope to see what was going on. "If they hadn't done things wrong, you might have been damaged," she informed us as she took in the situation. "I'd better go talk to Cyrus myself." She strolled on up the hill, walking and climbing, until she reached the little debate club.

We couldn't hear what she said. Her voice was mild, her effect was calming. They moved back from the brink to discuss it all further.

"I expected her to make more of a fuss than that," said Olivia.

"Not her," Velvet replied, taking out her case of precious cigarettes. "Got a match?"

"Out here?" Olivia made a snatch for the coffin nail in Velvet's mouth. "Are you nuts?"

"You heard him," Velvet said, waving uphill. "All the ammo's buried over where we'd be if Cyrus hadn't gotten his maps mixed."

"My!" said Sissy, standing up and brushing dirt from her uniform, "This picture certainly has its Greenlimbs."

We used to explain to Sissy that the word she wants is gremlins. But since she has added a villain named Greenlimbs to that endless book she's writing about Buster Kitten, we don't bother any more.

"It wasn't an accident," Velvet informed us, puffing on the cigarette though she still hadn't lighted it. Maybe they last longer that way. "Boris threw us down where he thought a bomb was going off, and he did it on purpose. If he'd had his way, we'd really be among stars now." She sucked on the white stick some more. "The big lug's doing it for Mona, of course. You can see he only has eyes for her."

"And only has ice for you," said Olivia, pulling her to her feet.

Velvet hunched her shoulders. "The big dope. It's just typecasting getting him to play a low-grade moron."

Sissy raised her chin. "Boris knows more in his little finger..."

The nostril-flare Velvet threw her is one of Velvet's trademark pieces of business. "If I were you," Velvet said, "I'd be more careful about choosing my friends."

"Yeah?" Sissy came right up to Velvet and glared up into her face. "Well, if I were you, I'd be taller!"

I laughed at that, throwing my head back and showing all my upper teeth, in an effort to induce merriment. When Sissy's of a mind to argue, no one's sanity is safe.

Velvet wouldn't let up, though. "Doesn't anybody else think about why Mona Banks would insist on our pretty faces' being in this picture, and nobody else's?"

"She said because we were too good for Mammoth Titan," Olivia answered.

"That's the idea," Velvet said. She took two steps toward camp and turned around. "Too good. Blowing up Carolina and then pinning the rap on the four co-stars knocks out five of the competition. There aren't enough movies to star all of us, you know."

We thought it over. "I don't think we're that much threat to Mona," I said.

"You aren't, maybe." Velvet finally found a match and lit her cigarette. "But I'll leave my mark."

"Like chicken pox," said Olivia. She made motions to all of us to start for camp, putting a little distance between Velvet's fire and Cyrus's fireworks. "You just don't want our old buddy Elmer to get picked up for it. He's the one who's been closest to Cyrus's controls, and knows where all the..."

"He didn't do it," Velvet said. The match had burned down to her fingers, and she threw it away.

"What do you go by to figure that?" Olivia demanded. "Hair color?"

"He didn't do it." Velvet took a long drag on the cigarette. "Because if he did do it, he's going to use that film to make me get one of my dad's lawyers to defend him. And I can't do it, so he'd release the film."

"What, that outrage from the combo scene?" I said. She seemed to be seriously concerned. "Anybody can see that was an accident, and it doesn't last long enough to..."

"Not that one," she said. "He's found this old... I made this picture once of a game of pool. No clothes on, any of us."



I didn't think there were any prints of that left."

"Yeah, I hear film gets brittle after thirty years," Olivia noted. "What's the problem? It's not like that's your only educational nudist documentary."

We all had a couple of these "naturist" films in our past. Velvet had more than the rest of us, of course. They call her Duz because she does everything.

"Dorothy's in it," she said, taking the cigarette out of her mouth to consider the flame. "You don't know Dorothy; she worked at Elsa's. I don't guess the studio would buy me out of that even if I could borrow the money to pay J. W. back."

I made a face. Velvet's folks had plenty of money; still have it, in fact, because they declined to spend more than was necessary on their kids. At fourteen, Velvet was told to get out and find a job. She washed dishes in a cathouse, and that's what started her on the downward path to pictures. She hadn't worked at Elsa's in any other capacity, or that's what she told us. We believed her, for Elsa didn't employ white women. But this was not a distinction the public could be counted on to make.

"Anyway," Velvet went on, setting the cigarette back on

her lower lip, "Dorothy's in the jug; they say she's with the Axis, working to demoralize the colored troops. I'd hate to be accused of associating with a Fifth Columnist."

"There!" said Sissy, shaking a finger at her. "That should teach you not to accuse just anybody of anything yourself. Accusing people is the way to become unpopular, and if you're unpopular, people won't like you."

Olivia was trying to take all this in. "I have an idea," I said.

"Beginner's luck," said Velvet, blowing smoke at me.

"We could try this," I told her. "Everyone knows the charges aren't where they're supposed to be, next to the red stakes, right? So we put a red stake next to where a charge really is and stand each of the suspects there, Elmer first. Anybody who won't do it must be someone who knows right where the charges are, and it's got to be that person who gimmicked the maps."

"Sure," said Olivia. "That makes sense. 'Step over here and stand next to this red stake; I promise you won't get blown up.' That's got plenty of crowd appeal."

"We'll get Jim over here and say he wants to take a picture as a souvenir of the filming," I said, pointing at our intrepid

photographer, who was discussing something with Steve off to one side where Cyrus was haranguing his "boys." "Sissy can go get Jim, and we can bring over—who do we want? Elmer, Boris . . . whoever."

Velvet shrugged. "It could work. If it doesn't, it wouldn't hurt to get a good picture of us standing with Mona Banks."

"I'll go get a stake," said Olivia, "while Sissy's getting our detective with the camera."

"Detective," snorted Velvet, tossing her last quarter inch of tobacco on the ground. "He couldn't find cuffs on his pants."

"He's got none any more," Sissy pointed out. "Where are you going to get a steak?"

"I'll explain it all some other time, Sissy," Olivia promised, taking her by one hand. "Let's go take care of business." They moseyed off in Jim's direction. Velvet and I went hunting for suspects.

My little plot was not really the clever detective work I had pretended because there was a lot to this scenario that I didn't understand. If Boris had thrown us down intentionally, and was thus part of the plan, then he must have known there were no explosives where he tossed us. So the misplaced charges were just meant to scare us, not damage us. If Bo-

ris hadn't known what he was doing—which I thought more likely—then it was all somebody else's plot, or just an accident. In any case, I didn't expect to learn anything much from this souvenir photography business. That wasn't my aim.

All I wanted to do was get Elmer right up next to one of those charges, in the hopes that Cyrus was going to have to set them off to find out where they were. It wasn't murder I wanted to commit, not really. I just wanted him maimed in a minor way so as to put him out of action until Velvet and I were out of his reach. Maybe he'd find a compliant nurse and forget us entirely.

My mistake was not filling Velvet in on any of this. Before I could spot Elmer, she had pulled up alongside Mona. "You want to get your picture taken?" Velvet asked her.

"Get my picture taken," Mona repeated, leaning in a little to get a better look at Velvet. "Why, heavens to Hollywood, no. I never let anybody point a camera at me. What are you thinking?"

"Psst!" I said.

Velvet didn't catch it. "No, no," she told Mona. "A kind of, like, souvenir picture. Jim's going to take one of us all standing next to one of those memo-

nable red stakes with no gunpowder under them."

"Memorable red stakes," said Mona, blinking a little. "Your Jim has a strange eye for dramatic pictures. But that's what makes the great photographers. Why not?"

They moved over to where Olivia was planting the battered red chunk of wood. Sissy and Jim were nowhere in sight yet, but Velvet started to compose the shot. "Right over here," she said. "And I'll stand on this side. Does that . . ."

"Hey, you idiots!"

We knew who we were and swung around to see Cyrus charging from behind the controls for his little toy battlefield. "Get away from there!" he shouted. "You got no brains? You . . ."

Velvet and Mona tried to explain at the same time as we fell back from the stake. "Get clear and keep clear!" ordered the technical expert. "We're fixing to . . ."

He pointed back toward his controls. We saw the top of a head behind them just before the whole world erupted at our feet.

**W**e couldn't see where Cyrus was damaged especially, but when he didn't jump up to call us names,

we all hollered for Doc. Tel-Tab had sent a doctor along to patch scraped elbows and make sure we were all sober at first call in the morning, but he knew his business.

"Heart," he told Muscari when the director kicked him and asked for the third time.

"Do we call the Silverstrike ambulance?" Muscari demanded.

"I'm okay," said our techie in a not very convincing whisper.

While the rest of us were watching this little drama, Sissy appeared, fixing the bow on her head with elbows higher than her ears. They didn't teach her this for the movies; I believe it's the only way she knows how to do it.

"I can't get Jim to come over," she complained.

"We don't really need him now, Sissy," I said. "Where is he?"

"Over there." She pointed in the direction of Cyrus's master controls. I didn't see him. I ambled over to look a little closer. He wasn't any more present from that angle.

I turned back to study the crowd around our fallen wizard, looking not just for Jim. I checked around our little second front, and took inventory.

Then, taking a deep breath, I moved up to our director to inform him that our spare stills

photographer, Steve Raymond, and Muscari's car all seemed to be missing.

Muscari turned from supervising the removal of Cyrus to a nice warm trailer. "Oh. Well. They probably headed into town for the ambulance. Good men!" He nodded numerous, obviously trying to convince himself. "We can shoot around Raymond until he gets back. We don't need him for that scene on the battle . . . Ah, hell, how can we shoot anything without the explosions?"

"Excuse me, sir."

This was Ralph, a pimple-faced sixteen-year-old who so far had exerted most of his energy in following Velvet around and trying to grow a mustache. Muscari had not paid much attention to such small fry.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

"I'm Cyrus's assistant," Ralph told him. "If he's out of action, I'm the senior technician."

"Well, hot doggies! Git you a roll of quarters and go to town!" Muscari took out his pipe and started to chew on the stem. Ralph said nothing.

"I want the organ grinder," our director snapped. "Not the monkey!"

Ralph still said nothing. I could see he was meant to go far in this business.

Muscari ground his teeth, nearly cracking the pipe. He took it out of his mouth. "Can you rig the battlefield for the next scene?"

"Of course," said Ralph, with a shrug.

"Do it." Muscari turned to the crowd. "All right, people. Nothing more to see. Ready for the next scene in twenty . . ."

"Fifteen," said Ralph.

"Fifteen minutes," Muscari told us. "Cyrus will be all right; Steve's gone to town for the ambulance. Let's keep moving."

Some of us were in favor of keeping moving, and some were not. "Why don't we just go home?" Boris grumbled. "This is serious sabotage."

"Sabotage?" Sissy's head came up as though the word had tickled her under the chin. "But that's what German spies do! Or Japanese spies! Or Italian spies! Only the good guys stop them just in time." She laughed at Boris and put a hand on his arm. "But spies don't work in movies. We don't even have any German guys or Japanese guys or Italian guys here." Muscari raised an eyebrow but said nothing at all, at all. Boris was not so easily entertained.

"Well, somebody around here wants us to quit breathing," he muttered. "Or quit making this

movie, whichever is more important."

"More important." Mona turned and blinked at him. Many eyes were on her and on him, and by the way heads were bobbing up and down, I could see that sentiment was moving toward Boris's point of view. That would have been an efficient means of sabotage: arrange a few accidents and then start a panic that would end filming. I wished I'd thought of that, preferably early yesterday.

"More important," she said again. "You know there are people out there dying for us, dying for what's important. And here we are making a movie that will go to them, that will give them something else to think about beside the way they're going to die so we can have what's more important. What can we do that's more important than working for the people who will die for us? What could be more important than doing something they'll be grateful to us for?"

If you saw Mona Banks in *After You've Gone*, you'll know it isn't what she says but how she says it. If I had said it, somebody would have asked, "So what we're doing couldn't be more important because it's for someone who's doing something more important? And

we're going to do this so people will be grateful to us after they die?" This is why she is Mona Banks and I'm the fourth chest from the left in the back row.

The crowd roared. Boris's eyes held nothing but solid worship. "And there is so little left to do," Mona went on. She turned to Muscari. "How much?"

He consulted his clipboard. "We've got most of the major stuff except for the scene ahead of the foxhole business, and the dugout sequence. I can replace the rest with stock footage. We can blow this war zone before anything else happens."

I joined the next cheer; if everything went okay, that meant we might be able to get out on the two twenty train out of Silverstrike, which is the only train out of Silverstrike. The afternoon work is never a lot of fun. Breakfast is so skimpy that we all get sloppy and have to go for take after take after take.

I could take about a two day nap and then find out what Cal had for me. Cal always had something. Before I signed on to have Cal represent me, I was going nowhere fast. Now I was getting there much faster. Maybe there are people Cal gives work. Me he just gives the works.

I've been in a hundred and ninety-eight pictures since I started, and not cut out of one hundred twenty-seven, and had been seen, to judge by the reviews, in two. Maybe this was the picture that would change all that for me. It could be destiny: anyhow, something seemed to be doing its best to make sure this picture was made no matter what anybody did to it. B. N. and J. W. and the others at Mammoth Titan might not be pleased; give me one solid hit and I wouldn't care about pleasing anybody at Mammoth Titan, no matter what letters he used.

"Come on," I told Sissy. "Better get fixed up."

She didn't hear me the first time as she was very busy frowning. I repeated my suggestion twice before she looked up into my face and declared, "I bet German spies don't like bunnies."

Best to just answer these things without worrying where they come from. "No, Sissy, they don't. But there aren't any German spies out here. I know because you said so."

The frown disappeared. "Oh. And I wouldn't lie, would I?"

"Certainly not," I said. "Let's go get some of the dirt out of our hair."

We headed off to the proper trailer to have our costumes,

coiffures, and complexions seen to. Once spiffed up, the four of us moved out past the underground shelter that would be the scene of our last effort on this location. It was mined to blow up just after we scrambled free, Boris, thanks to his old Bolshevik training, having "smelled" the bomb in the food Steve had just smuggled in. After that we would be chased to the edge of the cliff (the scene we'd filmed this morning), spout brilliant wit in No Man's Land (the scene we were about to film), hurry to the foxhole (the bit we were filming when Carolina was spread across the landscape), and finish with the grand scene with Steve and Mona (filmed day before yesterday). A lot of people seem to think we movie folk are untainted in the penthouse, but it isn't so. We just get addicted to doing everything inside-out.

Velvet studied the big mound of earth with its little door for us and the big opening for our noble crew. "I don't know," she said. "All they'd have to do . . ." She shook her head and didn't finish.

"Bunnies live in holes in the ground," Sissy noted, smiling.

Olivia nodded. "So do rats."

That particular consideration was at least an hour in the future. Our concern was the scintillating dialogue we were

to come out with after flying down the cliff. We found Ralph and Elmer hollering at the company, with our director nowhere in evidence.

"What's the prob, slob?" Olivia demanded, taking Ralph by one arm as he stomped by.

The kid threw up his hands. "We just get all the charges rigged and now we can't find the controls!"

"Why not just follow the wires, dimbulb?" Velvet suggested.

"Got no wires; it's Cyrus's own make." He waved a hand around at the battlefield. "Every charge is tuned to a certain radio wave; the control box sends out the different frequencies that make them blow. Turn the knob and press the buttons, and you can set off the charges in any order you like. That's how come Cyrus took all these accidents so personal; his system is foolproof."

"Can't argue with that," I said.

"Ah!" Ralph was gratified.

"Because I didn't understand any of it."

He shook an index finger at me: "It's Jap spies, that's what it is. They stole the box after arranging the accidents to put the kibosh on his project."

Sissy's attention had been wandering, but she came around at that. "Kibosh? Is

that the ketchup stuff Cyrus makes with curry powder?"

She spun around, not under her own power. "Just keep out of the way!" ordered Elmer, giving her a push that was part business and part pleasure. "You glamorpusses aren't any use around here at all!"

"Hey!" snapped Olivia. "Don't you know the president said this was going to be a woman's war?"

"Come on; let them look for their toy." Velvet started back the way we'd come. "Probably have time for a couple hands of cards before they figure out what they did with it."

"Ah, I don't want to walk all the way back to the trailer," I said.

"The dugout would be out of the sun," Olivia suggested, looking up toward the great ball of fire that was now high in the sky.

"I bet that's why the bunnies live there," said Sissy, brushing off her posterior as though Elmer had left marks. "What do you suppose they do in winter?"

"Complain about the coal shortage, like everybody else." I took one hand and led her toward the underground set for our last scene in this desert. The little mud cabin was not entirely underground, but there were about four steps to



negotiate down inside. Since we were wearing heels (part of the high humor of four club singers in a war zone), this took some time, and those of us who got down first turned to help the others make it safely.

So we were all actually inside the big grave before we noticed we were not alone. Muscari had not yet noticed he was not alone, as he was intent on something he was doing to Cyrus's control box with a screwdriver. It wasn't until Sissy asked me where the bunnies were that he frowned and looked up.

It was a picture worth exactly two words: "Get Out." But before I could sound the retreat, Velvet cried, "Is *everybody* trying to snafu this picture?"

We observed a moment of silence as the cat leaped out of the bag. Our director's eyes widened as he took in all the subtleties of Velvet's latest bit of dialogue.

"You mean you . . ." He set down the screwdriver. "I wish I'd known that. Here I've been trying to pin it all on Cyrus's boys, and I could have been doing it to you."

"You killed Carolina," said Olivia, in tones of calmest conversation.

"Nonsense." He stood up, a large metal object in the hand

he wasn't using to carry Cyrus's plaything. "I just moved a little string and a piece of wood. You weren't supposed to see those things, by the way. It was all going to be Cyrus's mistake. Nobody would hold an accident against him for long, and nobody was going to bother to find out what happened to the annoyance that got blasted to hell in the process."

We had started backing toward the door. He didn't see this in his script, and sort of wiggled his gun at us, moving to get between us and the exit. We didn't debate his interpretation of our role. We knew the place better than he did. He was a director of features, while we had shared the screen with this ersatz basement in plenty of serials. Most often it was a mad doctor's lab in Thunder Rollie Western cliffhangers. You'd be surprised how many mad doctors there were in the Old West.

And Muscari seemed to have forgotten there was this immense back door, where the cameras and sound equipment and lights and soft chairs for directors were hauled down during the filming. Oh, sure, that had a lock on it, too, and maybe he'd been clever enough to turn his key in it. But that lock hadn't worked since 1937; it made this set a popular place to

work. Once filming was completed, there was always a private spot for couples to slip away into to create their own little plots.

Our chance of getting out of there without bullet holes would be loads better through that door. We could spread out, offering a confusing variety of targets. We started to shuffle in that direction, keeping Sissy in the middle so she wouldn't ask questions. She simply assumed we were doing a chorus-line step.

But it would be even easier if he could be distracted. "What'd Carolina ever do to you?" I asked him.

"She didn't know what she was doing to me." His upper lip rolled toward his nose. "In fact, she told me she was going to rescue my career by replacing that has-been, Mona Banks. Worked hard to replace a real talent: she started planting stories in the press about Mona and some imaginary lover she called Esteban Ramone. Went after the people who didn't like to think of their heroine going with some gigolo. That backfired on her; there was so much ink about Mona the studio decided to take a flyer on this picture. Carolina got in on it somehow; she had something on somebody. Once she got here,

she started trying to wreck . . . or was that all you guys?"

"Not all of it," Velvet told him. "The rock, the . . ."

"Forget it." He wagged the gun and we forgot it. "I made Mona Banks what she is today. She did the same for me. I wasn't going to have both careers go down the tubes. I still won't."

And maybe he wouldn't, at that. My dreams of wide-open spaces were broken up by the chill of metal across the forehead. I'd reached the doorway where you slip around behind the dirt wall at the back of the dungeon to the work space. It hadn't occurred to me that someone might have done some work there. The passage was blocked by two cameras waiting to be rolled in for shooting, and a couple of chairs. If I had still been fourteen, I might have been able to squeeze out between them. I haven't been fourteen since the Hoover Administration.

"Yeah, stick around," said Muscari, who'd been wise all along. He rubbed one ear with the barrel of his gun as we eased around to face him. "I think what I'm going to have to do is shoot the bunch of you and then blow up the hut here. All accidental; the crackpot machine of Cyrus's can't be trusted. It'll mean getting

stand-ins to do your last couple of scenes, but who looks at your faces anyway, right?"

"Oh, no sense in that," I agreed. "It's all legs you watch this year."

I suppose he really should have been watching my hands, which were flat on the rustic wooden table as I threw my weight up, locked my legs around his waist, and swatted his gun up across the bridge of his nose. I learned to do these things for the serials. He plucked me off and gave me his best regards. I had not expected this. In the serials, the villain isn't allowed to kick the pretty girl in the stomach.

At any rate, he'd dropped both his toys. Being a man of some intelligence, he grabbed the gun up first. When he grabbed for the control box, it was gone.

"Give me that!" said Velvet.

"Keep it away from him, Sissy!" Olivia shouted at the same time.

"You'd better not let that get broken," Muscari snarled, rubbing his nose. He'd been dealing with Sissy for some time and knew how to do it. "Just give it here and I'll check it."

"Where do you think I was born? On a planet?" Sissy demanded. "You'd keep it and not give it back, too!" She clutched the control box to her chest. A

muffled roar from outside told us this was a mistake.

Everyone lunged for Sissy except me as I was still curled up on the floor. I did grab at Muscari's ankle in passing. That gave me a chance to get a really close look at his heels, which were not too rundown to make an impression in my forehead.

"No no no no!" said Sissy as Muscari got hold of part of the controls. She let go for a moment to punctuate this line with a fist. Sissy's fists look soft, but they have the standard number of knuckles. Muscari fell backward but had the presence of mind to sway out of reach of Velvet's combat boots.

I looked around for a weapon, but the set wasn't fully dressed. That table would have been too much for me even if I had all my breath, and the chairs were beyond me right now. The only other prop on hand was the basket of food Steve was supposed to bring in so Boris could find a bomb among the salamis. Jim had said it would be more of a surprise to the audience if he found a real salami.

That was an idea. Catching at the basket with one hand, I used the other to haul out a wooden salami and whacked our director's ankles with it. He didn't like that much. But as

critics had pointed out, Muscari was kind of predictable. When the foot came in at me, I was braced for it, and wrapped myself around it. He dragged the other foot to try to stay upright.

"Come on, Sissy! This way!" Olivia and Velvet were shoving at the cameras, trying to make an exit.

Before they could make much headway, a much closer explosion made us all wonder whether Sissy had started the charges under the hut. We froze. Only Sissy herself knew what was going on.

"You better not shoot any bunnies!" she huffed at Muscari, setting her feet and leaning forward to glare at him.

That did him very little harm. He swept the control box from her arms and swung one corner of it into my forehead, which he had dented once already. "Now!" he barked, in his best directorial voice. "Everybody! Up against that wall!" He hauled me to my feet and gave me a directional shove. "That wall! Face to the wall!"

"Listen," Olivia panted. "You can't do this. You won't get away with it."

"Yes," I agreed. "We . . . we told Mona. She'll tell the studio."

"Then Mona may have an accident. Over there!" Olivia was too slow, so he took her by one

shoulder and pushed her nose into the wall. "I don't need Mona Banks to be a success; I just need one last hit out of her to get things moving again."

Things started to move almost immediately. The five of us looked back to find out what was going on. Where the front door of the dugout had been there were now hanging hinges and a bulky shadow.

"So!" said this shadow. "Going to kill Mona, hah?"

I felt no immediate sense of rescue on seeing Boris because I didn't know if he was on our side, particularly. He did seem to be on Mona's side, which would do for now. Anyway, he had opened that door for us.

Having opened it, though, he just sort of stood there. "He can't see!" shouted Velvet. She ran for him. "Get out of the way, you dimbulb! There's a gun!" Muscari recovered from shock at the same time and, patriotically deciding to ration his bullets, brought the gun down slowly so he could hit them both in the same shot.

A gun, a gun. I'd done guns a thousand times in the serials. "DOROTHY grabs the hand with the gun in it." "MYRNA grabs for his gun." "The JUNGLE GIRL sneaks up from behind bushes and reaches for gun." I had it down pat, thanks

to Cal the Superagent, right through the following direction, "Struggle ensues."

But no script had ever mentioned what the redheaded jungle girl is supposed to do when she's got both her hands on that wrist and the wild-eyed villain jerks a metal rectangle up between her legs. Hard. I jerked my knees together on the control box and the dugout shook from an explosion close at hand.

"Get off, get off!" Velvet ordered Boris, which was kind of historic, only we were all too busy to appreciate it. I was keeping Muscari's hands where I could see them, Olivia was heading for the front door, and Sissy was crawling on the floor, looking for the bunny Muscari was obviously shooting at.

"Let go!" he growled.

"Get away!" I ordered Sissy as she crept right in front of the gun barrel.

"Help!" screamed Olivia, trying to climb over Boris and Velvet to get as far as the exit.

Muscari was getting frantic, twisting to yank either the gun or the control box away from me. For some reason, odds of five to one terrified him where four to one hadn't.

"Listen!" he yelled, thumping me on the head with his own forehead. "We can talk! I can cut this picture to make Bo-

ris the lead! Who knows where you could go from there?"

"You're going to hell!" belted Boris, trying to untangle his arms and legs from Velvet's.

That was what had Muscari twitching. We'd been trying to get away; Boris was trying to kill him.

He let go of the big metal toy so as to get both hands on the gun. I already had both hands on that gun and was barely holding it where I wanted it. So I let go of that and rolled back, raising the control box between us in case he decided to shoot me first. He was still obsessed with Boris, who was rising to all fours, and leveled the person-perforator in that direction.

I swung the control box square against his shins. He hollered, but had the presence of mind to bring the gun down at my head.

My feeling was that he'd hit me enough for one day. "Sissy!" I screamed. "He's shooting bunnies again!"

Growling, Sissy charged, rising from the ground to catch his gun hand and bite it. I headed for the front door, passing Boris on the way. Velvet was gone. Olivia's feet were just passing out of view.

A glance behind showed both Boris and Sissy grappling with

our director. The gun went off and the doorframe spit splinters at me. I went on up and out. If Boris couldn't keep Sissy out of trouble, I wasn't going to be much help.

I couldn't see much as I rose into the sunlight. There wasn't much to see. Just about everybody had taken cover when the lot started to dance around them.

"It's Muscari!" I shouted, holding the control box up with two hands. "He . . ."

A third hand dived into the back of my collar, jerking me off my feet. Muscari had no gun now, so he swapped for the controls with a kick where he thought it would do me the most good. Then, propping the box on one knee, he twisted a big black knob around a circle of numbers until he found one he liked. At that point, a hand was jammed into the back of his collar as well.

This vast avenger wasted no time kicking or grabbing. Clapping Muscari and the technological toy together, he threw them back down the dugout stairs.

Then we were all thrown down, as half the western landscape flew around us. I remember thinking how fortunate it was that Tel-Tab hadn't made a lot of horse operas lately.

"Sissy?" I called, when the earthquake had settled a bit.

"Look at that!" she huffed. We sat up to find her standing next to a hole in the ground. We crawled over to take a look.

"What will the bunnies do now?" she demanded, pointing down. The hole was just half as deep as the dugout had been. Loose earth was mingled with bits of camera. A couple of our lifters and haulers jumped in to dig around for bits of our director.

"Would someone please tell me what's happening?" Mona said, joining us at the edge of the pit.

Boris rose and took her hands. "He was trying to kill you, plum dumpling."

"Plum dumpling," said Mona, frowning. She looked Boris up and down, and then glanced at the crowd. Satisfied that the majority was concentrating on the dugout, she reached into her blouse and took out a pair of glasses.

"You!" she said, pulling her hands away. Even with the glasses, though, she wasn't positive, and had to lean forward. "Is that you? When did you grow the beard?"

"For this picture, plum dumpling." He looked as if he wanted to take her hands back, but he didn't. "I had to see you again."

The chin seemed to tighten as Mona moved it up and down. "So that's why we've been having so many accidents."

"No, no, no!" Boris's hands twisted around each other for lack of anything else to hold. "It was all them." For a second I thought he was pointing at me, but I realized his hand had gone up to indicate the collapsed dugout. "Muscari and your stand-in. They're the ones who had it in for you. You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, plum dumpling."

She tipped her head back, lifting her eyebrows. "That divorce was final some time ago," she noted.

I was shuffling toward them so as not to miss a word of this when a sharp, screaming sound made us all hit the dirt again. This was mere nervousness; a second's thought told us it wasn't an air raid siren at all. The sky held zero Zeros. The noise came closer.

The ambulance had barely pulled to a stop when the back burst open to release Steve Raymond. Jim was right behind him.

"It's okay, it's okay!" they called, in case we had missed them. "The medical Maxwell is for Cyrus. We just hitched a ride back here in it to save Muscari's gasoline."

"Where is he?" Steve went on as nobody cheered their return. "Got a message for him."

"I'll take it," said Elmer, striding among the loose dirt of the battlefield.

"Doesn't matter," Steve told him, handing over a piece of paper. "Everybody's got to know. They say the accidents are so expensive they want us back at the studio, pronto."

We waited in silence as Elmer read. "Okay," he said, nodding. "Strike everything. He lied to us this morning; he never got any telegram."

"No choice, really, now," said Olivia. "No head techie, no director."

"What happened now?" Jim demanded, looking around.

"We'll explain later," I told him. "There'll be time for that when we're all back in town."

He didn't seem to be especially interested anyhow. After looking to Steve, he said, "Well, you'll be back in town. We won't. We went to Silverstrike in the first place to get our passports."

"Passports?"

"Our traveling papers," said Steve. He took out a document. "Somebody's got to go help MacArthur beat the Japs."

That was what their conspiracy was about: faking Steve's age so they could run off and kill a lot of Axis. The next cou-



ple of hours are a long montage in my memory. You'd've thought Steve and Jim had announced they were engaged; they were surrounded at once, with much congratulating and jeering and handshaking and hugging. There must have been some concerted effort to get us all packed up, and drive us into Silverstrike to catch the two twenty. I don't remember much until the railroad station: Elmer picking up a stack of telegrams, orders from the studio and from his dedicated customers, and the train pulling in, two cars loaded with young men in uniform, all looking like they were on the forty-ninth hour of a forty-eight hour pass.

But there are no clear scenes in my mind until the men hauled Jim and Steve away to a makeshift club car for a drink, giving them names they ought to know so as to draw an assignment to a motion picture unit, an ambition they both denied. We were invited to come along, but I wasn't as muddled as all that. I'd dodged enough peril for one day.

This left so few in our car that my mind could clear. Sissy and Mona had stayed behind and were urgently discussing the differences among bunnies, rabbits, and bunny rabbits. Boris sat with an arm around

Mona, beaming as if the conversation was something he'd dreamed of for decades. I took this to mean that he and Mona had patched up their differences, whatever those had been.

Velvet occupied another pew, with her right arm around a captain and her left around a pfc. Neither seemed to notice this breach of service discipline. In fact, neither seemed to notice the other.

Elmer stood in the middle of the aisle, staring at one of his messages. It was no very happy story, to judge by the size of his eyes behind the massive lenses. "Government rationing cocaine now?" I inquired.

He didn't answer. I rose on tiptoe to peek over his shoulder. I needed to look only as far as "Greetings" to realize it was the nicest news I'd had since I heard they'd painted my picture on a bomber.

"They can't do this," he said, the paper shaking in his hand. "I have connections! And . . . and flat feet!"

I patted him on the bottom. "I don't believe I'll say I hope things go off without a hitch," I said. "You're one lackey who's gonna look wacky in khaki."

Olivia was sitting alone, so I plopped down next to her to give her the glad tidings. "I figure they can just give Elmer

the white flag concession and drop him behind enemy lines," I said as I finished.

She turned toward me. She didn't seem to have been listening. "You haven't seen it yet, have you?"

Her eyes were empty. "What?" I demanded. "What's wrong?"

She jerked her head back toward the debate club. "Mona and Boris."

I glanced at them. "What about them? I was kind of happy for them."

"Oh, it's all right for them." She shrugged. "Bad for us, though. This picture's got Goering's chance of ever being cheered at a Saturday matinee now."

"Well, all Tel-Tab has to do is film some scenes to fill in the gaps and . . ."

Her head swung back and forth, faster and faster. "Don't you get it? Boris is B. N.!"

"B. N.?" I said. I looked back at Boris. "The studio's . . . J. W.'s . . . the Mammoth Titan vice-president?"

She nodded. "Remember? J. W. wanted this film sabotaged because Mona divorced his son. He didn't know B. N. had other plans. So now what happens? B. N. and Mona get married again. Think she'll be doing anything for Tel-Tab

once she's married back into the Mammoth Titan fold?"

"But there must be a contract . . ."

"Even if she does finish the film," Olivia pushed on, "they can't release it until the killings have blown over. J. W. and the Mammoth Titan publicity department can make sure that doesn't happen until the war's a bad memory. Who's going to want to see war pictures then?"

I chewed on this for a minute. "Okay," I said. "So J. W. can knock off *Way Over There*, and it never makes the screen. It can't hurt us to have Mona, who likes us, married into Mammoth Titan management. There'll be other pictures."

She nodded. "And we won't be in them. Because J. W. isn't like the head of Tel-Tab. If a star starts making casting suggestions, he figures they'll be asking for real money next. Or start turning down his cheap pictures to ask for better material."

"Would B. N. let J. W. refuse his own wife's demands?" I asked.

"Oh no," Olivia said. "But remember, J. W. knows something Mona and Boris don't know about what we were doing on this picture. While he's got that on us, he can just tell us we're too busy any time Mona or Boris asks for some-

thing. And we'll be too busy, just like he says, or we don't work again."

It made a lot of sense, the way she told it, but she was an actress. She could make anything sound plausible. There were lots of holes in her scenario.

Trouble was, I couldn't think of any.

"Well, what's the diff?" I said. "Anybody can memorize a bunch of lines and get top billing. It takes talent to get a job wearing six inch spikes in a water ballet."

She chuckled merrily and set her head against the seat ahead of her, closing her eyes. "You're right. Peons have job security a star can never get: no matter how big a stinker the picture is, nobody blames the dollies in the chorus."

"You want to have Sid Skolsky pestering the life out of you, asking what you wear to bed?" I said, jovially burying my head in my hands. "I wouldn't give ten cents to have Bob Hope hand me one of those cheesy little brass bookends."

"Mighty rough on Bette Davis, having to polish two of those things," Olivia agreed, sighing.

"And she never gets to wiggle herself and show her pants in the jitterbug scenes," I pointed out. We had a good laugh at the trials and tribulations of our less fortunate counterpart. The laughter was pretty soggy by the time we got to town. Other people got off the train looking at a big city loaded with possibilities. We could see only another dozen years as sweet, bumpy background in other people's movies.

"Hey hey hey!" Cal had come to meet us. The gleam in his eye matched the one from his domed head. "Glad you're back; got something for you." He put a hand on Olivia and one on me, leaving none for his cigar. "Just another beauty contest, but the fix is in this time for sure. When the judges get done, everybody will know you're the biggest busts in town."

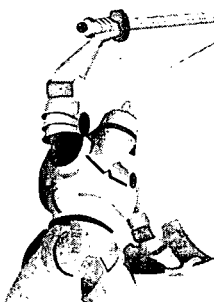
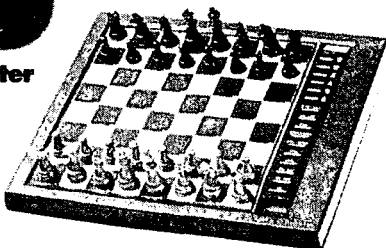
"Thanks, Cal," I said. "We suspected that already."

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# UNSOLVED

by  
*Robert Kesling*

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the October issue.*

Like most summer Tuesdays in Centerfield, this one began quietly, uneventfully. That morning the only difference noted by old Zack Wilson and his pals, who occupied their customary vantage point on the long wrought-iron benches bordering the courthouse square, was a procession of five black cars—a Buick, Chevrolet, Ford, Packard, and VW—that circled the square three times. Each was driven by a brightly painted woman with a mean-looking stranger beside her. In fact, it seemed so unusual that Zack jotted down the license numbers inside a match folder from Ma's Jiffy Restaurant, the establishment where he and his cronies took mid-morning and midafternoon coffee and doughnut breaks.

Then at high noon, while the good townspeople were at dinner, a lone masked bandit held up the Centerville bank, ran out through the side door with his loot, and escaped in his car driven by his girlfriend. Maude Jenkins, the only teller on duty, was too overcome to notice any details. "That horrible man scared me half to death!" she explained to anyone who would listen.

Police located the cars reported by Zack at Pierre Laconic's lodge on Mudcat Lake, where the suspects had rented cabins, and arrested the five men and women on suspicion of robbery. The money could not be found.

Inspector Hector soon discovered that the suspects were the notorious Caccatorio brothers and that all five cars were registered to "John Smith." He also learned from a reliable source that three of the brothers invariably lied—about everything—and that two were always truthful, but his informant steadfastly refused to identify the truthful ones. Unfortunately, old Zack and his cronies disagreed on who was riding in which car that morning, and Pierre (who asked only prompt payment of his guests) claimed the women all looked alike to him.

Back at the Centerville police station, the five women (Gert, Hannah, Isabella, Jessica, and Kate) refused to talk. "A more hard-

boiled lot I've never encountered," declared Inspector Hector later. The five brothers (Alfie, Buzz, Clem, Digger, and Elgar), however, made the following brief statements, to which Hector's assistant added helpful numbers for future reference:

Alfie claimed: "(1) My girl Gert drives my VW. (2) It was Buzz who ran out with the dough. (3) Kate drove the Chevy to get away."

Buzz stated: "(4) Alfie lies, but he isn't guilty. (5) Kate actually drives the Buick, and (6) Alfie owns the Ford."

Clem swore: "(7) Isabella goes with Buzz, and (8) Hannah is Digger's woman. (9) Jessica drives the VW."

Digger declared: "(10) Elgar ran out of the bank, jumped into his VW, and was driven away by his girl, Gert. (11) Kate is not my woman; you can ask Clem, who never lies. (12) Alfie's gal Hannah drives his Packard."

And Elgar said: "(13) As Buzz can tell you, and he tells the truth, Digger didn't pull this job. (14) The Packard is not driven by Gert. (15) Isabella is my woman, always has been."

Wily Inspector Hector quickly figured out which brothers lied. Thereafter, it was a simple matter to charge the guilty pair and identify the getaway car.

*Can you do as well as the inspector?*

## **SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED":**

Detective Ryan's list read: "A. + C. Rimeo, F. + H. Orrible, H. + A. Tebyeri, K. + F. Oresth, E. + K. Illed, and C. + E. Liasson." After puzzling over it for a few minutes, he declared, "Very clever! 'A crime of horrible hate by Erik Forest. He killed Celia's son.'"

DAY	HUSBAND	WIFE	RETIRED
Monday	Arthur Rimeo	Celia	doctor
Tuesday	Frank Orrible	Helga	agent
Wednesday	Henry Tebyeri	Alice	farmer
Thursday	Karl Oresth	Flora	banker
Friday	Ernest Illed	Kitty	clerk
Saturday	Charles Liasson	Elsie	engineer

# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

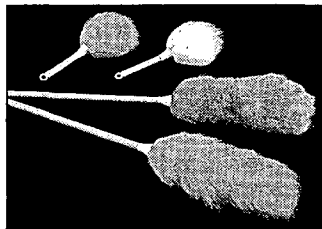


## ▼ SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY

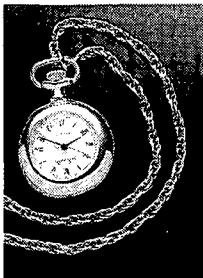
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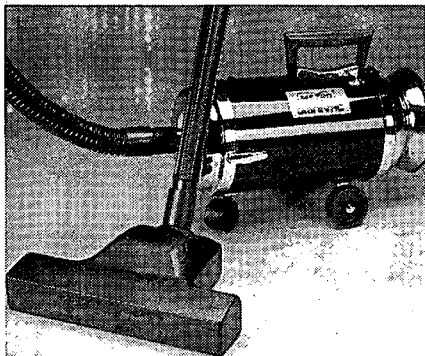
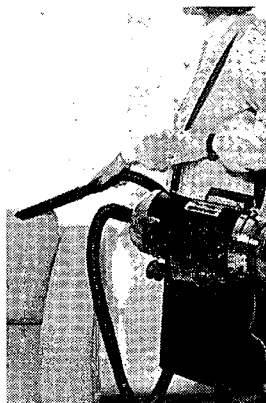
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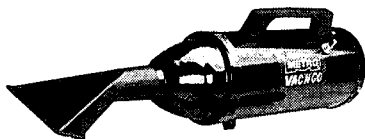
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FICTION

# THE VOLKSWAGEN HEART

by G. L. Tassone



Illustration by Donald Cook

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**M**anny poured syrup over his waffle. He dropped a large cube of butter onto his plate, splattering syrup over his flowery tie. Martha, Manny's wife, sipped her coffee and watched Manny stuff his mouth with waffle.

"What's the matter?" Manny asked his wife. "You ain't eating. Ain'tcha hungry?"

"No. I'm not hungry. I think I had too much to drink last night."

"Yeh, that was some party."

"Manny," Martha said, "why do you always tell that story about swimming the English Channel? You've never even been to England."

"What kinda talk is that?" Manny said, his face red, his mouth filled with waffle. "You know I was on the swimming team at Oxford. One night, after we had just beat Cambridge, I was at the beach with the guys from the team. We was having a victory party, and I swam the channel. It was a nice night when I started out."

Martha got up from the table and went into the living room with her coffee.

Manny continued talking. "The water was like glass, barely a ripple. It was a balmy night, and there was a full moon, stars all over the sky. I started out, and the guys was

cheering me. I was a little drunk, but the cold water fixed that. I can still taste how salty it was after all these years. I was about two hours out, and things got rough. The wind came up, and the water got mean. The waves got house-big. I thought of turning back, but I hated to disappoint the guys. They had all left by boat to meet me on the French coast. Dawn was just breaking when I got to France. The guys were all there—the whole team—they had brandy for me, and the reporters from the Frog papers were there."

Martha returned for more coffee. Millie, the maid, was clearing the table.

Manny continued talking as though Martha had never left. "We went to Paris and had this party lasted four days. Greatest party I ever been to. I got all the French papers around here somewhere."

Martha sat down at the table. "Manny," she said, "let's both go on a diet. You're getting so heavy it scares me, and I'm not far behind. I've been reading about a new diet in the newspaper."

Manny's large face got very red. "Martha, I don't wanta hear about no diets. I told you that before. Remember the one we went on after Christmas

... I gained ten pounds. Some kinda diet that was."

"But, Manny, we didn't stop drinking. We didn't eat as much, but we drank more. You can't drink and lose weight. We both have to cut down. Remember what Dr. Harris told you?"

Manny choked on his coffee. It ran down his huge chin and onto his silk shirt. "Harris-Smarris!" he said. "That quack! That guy don't know nothing! I didn't spend three years at Harry Hopkins Medical School to learn nothing. I coulda been a great doctor, like my old man, but I quit to play pro football. I never shoulda quit right in the middle of my education like that. All my profs said I was gonna be a great surgeon. But Lombardi, that's Vince Lombardi from the Packers, he talked me into playing. He said the Packers needed me. It broke my old man's heart. He made a lotta sacrifices to put me through Harry Hopkins. He sacrificed his own career to put me through school."

"Sacrificed what career?" Martha said. "You mean that career of embezzling, extortion, and murder that he got thirty years for?"

Manny looked like he was going to explode. "I told you he was a prison doctor. He was noble, like Schweitzer. He always worked with poor people, that's

why he never made any money."

"He never made any money," Martha said, "because he always got caught."

"I don't want you talking like that, and you know it," Manny said, getting up from the table. He was of average height, but he weighed well over two hundred pounds. Though he was strong through the shoulders, the rest of his body had gone to fat. He was wearing an expensive gray suit that was wrinkled and rumpled even though he had put it on for the first time that morning. His sandy hair was sparse, and small blue eyes continually seemed to squint in his huge, heavy face.

An automobile horn sounded from the street. "That's Ziggy to pick me up," Manny said. "We're going to Magruder's gym. I got a new fighter I wanta watch work out. I get any calls, nobody knows where I am ... unless it's important. You understand?"

"Yes," Martha said. "No calls unless it's important."

Manny left the house and got into the black Lincoln parked in the driveway. Ziggy, a small man with glasses, no hair, in a black silk suit, was behind the wheel. "Good morning, boss," he said. "Where to?"

"Magruder's," Manny said, allowing his weight to sink into

the car seat. "Got a new boy I wanta watch work out."

"Geez, boss, we gonna get back into the fight racket after the dumping we took with Jimmy Boyle?"

Magruder's Gym was on the second floor, above Polking's Hardware. Ziggy parked the black Lincoln at the curb and followed Manny up the stairs. Manny was breathing heavily when he entered the gym. He was perspiring, and he wiped his wet face with his silk handkerchief. "Christ, it's hot in here," he said. "Get me a Coke, Ziggy."

He sat in a folding chair near the ring. Ziggy brought the bottle of Coke. There were half a dozen boxers working out in the gym. One was shadow-boxing, two were punching speedbags, and a slender lightweight was jumping rope in a far corner. There were two boxers in the ring. Manny studied them, sipping on his Coke.

Mathews, a young black middleweight with skin the color of brown dust, was moving fast and easy. The other fighter, another black man, larger and heavier, was having trouble with Mathews' left jab, which was constantly snapping in his scarred face. When the bell sounded, Manny stood up. Some of his Coke had run down his chin and onto his suit.

"Damn," he said, wiping his face with his sleeve. He motioned to Mathews, "Come'ere."

The fighter stepped out of the ring. Magruder, a small man chewing a cigar, joined the huddle.

"Magruder," Manny said, "the Kid looks pretty good."

Magruder smiled. "Yeh, I think so. I been spending a lot of time with him. He trains hard."

Mathews was silent, a pleasant flicker in his dark eyes.

"Trouble is," Manny said, "the Kid's left... it needs work. He's too stiff with it. It needs more snap."

"Manny, you ain't serious," Magruder said. "The Kid has one of the best lefts I've ever seen."

A scowl crossed Manny's face. "Magruder," he said, "who does Mathews belong to? Me, right? And I don't like the way he's using his left. I learned to use my left from the best. Time I fought in the Golden Gloves in Philly, I met Sugar Ray in the finals. That was his only defeat as an amateur. It was a hell of a fight. My left made all the difference. I won the fight on points, but I could've put Sugar Ray down. I didn't want to hurt the guy. You know what I mean."

Magruder shook his bald head. "Yeh, I know, Manny. I know what you mean."

"All right," Manny said, slapping Mathews on the back. "That's enough for today."

Kid Mathews picked up a towel and left for the showers.

Manny turned to Magruder. "Another thing, we need a new name. I don't like Kid Mathews. Not for a classy fighter like this boy." He closed his eyes and sipped on his Coke. "I got it," he said, opening his eyes, Coke running down his chin. "Kid Magic." He said it again, slowly. "Kid Magic, I like it. It's got class."

"Boss," Ziggy said, "I don't know how you do it. You come up with a name like Kid Magic, right out of nowhere. That's genius, boss."

"I'm getting hungry," Manny said. "Let's drive out to the club for lunch."

Ziggy followed Manny down the stairs and into the black Lincoln.

In the dining room of the Plumbrook Country Club, Manny had two vodka martinis and the roast beef special. "Heavy on the gravy," he told the waiter.

Ziggy had a Coke and a grilled cheese sandwich. He watched Manny stuff his mouth with mashed potatoes and hot beef, and watched the thick gravy run down Manny's chin and onto his suit.

They were sitting next to the windows facing the eighteenth green. Manny watched the golfers as they putted out and criticized their styles.

"My old man," he said to Ziggy, "now there was a golfer. Did I ever tell you about the time he played with Hogan and Snead?"

"No, I don't think you did," Ziggy said, biting into his grilled cheese.

"I was just a kid. Dad didn't get to play too much golf because of his medical practice. This one summer, Hogan and Snead came to town for an exhibition. My old man was a scratch player and had just won the State Amateur, so they asked him to play. I caddied for Dad. He was three under par going into the last hole. Hogan and Snead weren't too happy because Dad was outplaying them. On the last hole, Dad asked if it would be all right if I hit his drive for him. I was only twelve at the time but big for my age. Snead laughed and said go ahead. Well, I took Dad's driver, and a smooth, easy swing, and knocked it right down the middle. I hit it dead center, with a little right-to-left draw. It was a thing of beauty. Snead gritted his teeth and almost jumped off the ground to hit his drive past mine. He hooked it in the



rough. Hogan smiled, he was a gentleman at all times. His drive was about ten yards short of mine.

"After the match, Snead wanted me to go on an exhibition tour with him, but Dad said was I going to be a doctor. He already had me steered toward Harry Hopkins."

Manny called the waiter and asked for a bottle of beer to wash the beef down.

After lunch, Ziggy drove Manny to the various book-makers who worked for him so they could pick up the previous day's receipts. It was early evening when Ziggy dropped Manny at home.

Inside the house, Manny made himself a martini. Martha came into the room. "Well, did you have a good day?" she asked.

"Yeh, good day . . . bad day. They're all the same. Who cares? What's for dinner?"

"I don't know. I'm having a salad. I've started a diet."

Manny made another martini. "Martha, I ain't never seen anyone like you. Diet! Diet! Who needs it! You look okay. You ain't much heavier than when I married you and you was dancing in the chorus at the Copa."

"Manny, I was never in the chorus at the Copa. I wish you'd stop telling people that. I've

never been a dancer. I was slinging hash in a diner when you met me. I'm heavier now than I've ever been. I look like a cow. You're the only person I know who looks worse. I'm going to lose weight or die trying."

Manny finished his martini. "You coulda been a great dancer. Professor Finster, he was the top man at Harry Hopkins, he was against diets. He said if you ate right you didn't have to worry. He said you would never eat more than your body needed."

Martha went into the kitchen. Millie came out carrying a huge platter.

"What's for dinner, Millie?" Manny asked.

"Steaks, french fries, salad, and chocolate eclairs for dessert."

Manny sat down at the table. "Looks great," he said. "I'm starving."

Martha sat across from Manny and began to eat the salad Millie placed in front of her.

"Rabbit food," Manny said, his mouth filled with steak. "That stuff'll kill you. Salads are poison. That's what Finster used to say."

Martha finished her salad. Manny shoved an éclair in front of her. "Try that on for size," he said. "They're great."



"No, thanks," Martha said, leaving the table.

Manny reached for the eclair. "Well, no sense letting it go to waste."

Later that evening when Manny entered the bedroom, Martha was in bed reading. She watched Manny undress and saw the soft folds of his flesh fall about him. He stood nude in front of the mirror. "You know," he said, "Maybe I am getting a little heavy. I think I'll start jogging every morning. I'll get the old body back in shape. I used to run cross-country for Harry Hopkins. It was beautiful in the fall. I'd do twenty miles and never even breathe hard. Great running across those October fields."

Martha looked up from her book. "Manny, football season is in the fall."

"Yeh," Manny said, getting a pair of bright green pajamas. "I ran when it didn't interfere with my football."

The next morning when Manny awoke, Martha was standing on a scale in a corner of the room. She turned and saw him looking at her. "Manny," she said, "would you believe it? I've lost four pounds already."

"That scale don't work right," Manny said. "I told you that before."

"Yes, but you said it weighed heavy. Now I'm weighing lighter."

"Lighter! Heavier! What's the difference? It's busted."

Martha stepped off the scale. "I don't care, I'm getting lighter. I can see it, and I can feel it."

That morning Manny put on a new brown suit. The trousers were too tight. Damn tailor, Manny thought, can't even fit a pair of pants.

He went downstairs for breakfast. Martha was eating a piece of dry Melba toast. Millie brought in French toast and bacon for Manny. He smeared it with syrup. His mouth filled with food, he looked at his wife. "Is that all you're having?"

"That's all," Martha said proudly.

Manny finished eating and got up from the table. He had syrup on his new suit. Outside, Ziggy sounded the horn. "See you tonight," Manny said, leaving the house.

It was a beautiful day. Manny wheezed his way into the car.

"Good morning, boss," Ziggy said. "Nice day, ain't it?"

"Yeh," Manny said. "It reminds me of the Saturday afternoon I scored twenty-eight points against Dartmouth."

Ziggy drove to Magruder's. Manny was out of breath when

he reached the second floor gym. When he sat down near the ring, he could feel a sharp pain clutching at his heart. Manny watched Kid Magic work out, but his mind was on his chest.

"What's the matter, boss?" Ziggy said. "You don't look so good."

"Little heartburn," Manny said. "I'll be all right."

That afternoon the pain was still there. Manny was worried. "You make the collections," he told Ziggy. "Drop me off at Dr. Harris's. Pick me up when you're through."

Dr. Harris was a young man with pale skin and a thin red mustache. "Mr. Resnick," he said. "I haven't seen you in some time. How's Mrs. Resnick?"

"She's fine," Manny said impatiently. "I got this pain, right here, below my heart. Started this morning. I thought maybe you could give me something for heartburn. I had an Alka-Seltzer for lunch, but the pain is still there."

Dr. Harris gave Manny an examination. When he had finished and Manny was getting dressed, he said, "Here's the way it is, Mr. Resnick... you're seriously overweight. If you don't go on a diet, and quick, you won't be around much longer. Your blood pres-

sure is dangerously high. You're carrying too much weight around. Your heart can't carry the load. You've got a Volkswagen engine in a Mack truck body."

"You mean I might not make it, Doc?" Manny said, perspiration running in the folds of his neck.

Dr. Harris made some notations on Manny's chart. "If you don't cut down on the eating, you don't have much of a future to look forward to. I'll give you some pills to reduce your appetite, but it's really up to you. I'll want to see you next week, to see how much you've lost."

When Manny left the doctor's office, the black Lincoln was parked at the curb. "What'd the doc say?" Ziggy asked.

"Everything's good. I'm in great shape. Maybe I'll lose a few pounds anyway. Just to stay in top condition."

"That's good, boss," Ziggy said. "Where to?"

"Home," Manny said. "I'm tired. I'm going to have dinner and go to bed."

Martha was sitting in the living room, reading a book on diets. She looked up when Manny entered. "What's wrong? You look terrible. Your face is green."

Manny went to the bar and made himself a martini. "I

don't feel good. I been to see Doc Harris."

"What's the matter?" Martha asked with concern.

"I had this pain in my chest, like heartburn. Doc Harris says I'm a little overweight. My blood pressure is up. I gotta go on a diet for a few days."

"Well, that martini you're drinking isn't going to help."

Manny felt a pain burn sharp in his chest. "Yeh, I guess you're right. What's for dinner?"

"Roast chicken and mashed potatoes, unless you're serious about that diet. Then it's salad and a glass of fruit juice."

"Guess I'll try the salad. Might as well get back into shape."

After dinner, Manny complained about how hungry he was.

"In a few days," Martha said, "your stomach will shrink, and you won't even notice it."

The next morning Manny's chest pain was gone, but the hungry feeling was still in his stomach. Martha was standing on the scale. She turned and saw that Manny was awake. "Manny," she said. "I can't believe it! I've lost another four pounds. I haven't been this thin in ten years. I feel great! Just great!"

Manny lumbered out of bed. His pajamas were crumpled

and his face looked worse. He got on the scale. "This damn scale is busted," he said angrily. "I weigh four more pounds than I did on Doc Harris's scale yesterday, and I haven't had anything to eat but that lousy salad."

"Are you certain?" Martha asked. "It can't weigh you heavy and me light. Maybe the scale in Dr. Harris's office was off."

"Don't be silly! The doc's scale wouldn't be wrong. Besides, I'm heavier on this one, and I haven't had hardly anything to eat or drink."

Manny got dressed. He noticed that his blue suit was tight in the waist. He had a glass of orange juice for breakfast and a piece of dry toast. "Can't live on this," he said. "I might as well be dead."

That morning Ziggy once again drove Manny to Magruder's gym. It seemed to take Manny forever to climb the stairs to the second floor. The pain in his chest was so sharp he was afraid he was going to die right there.

"Geez, boss," Ziggy said, "you don't look so good. Maybe we better go see the doc."

"I'll be all right," Manny said. "I just have to sit down and get my breath."

After watching Kid Magic train, Manny started to tell

Magruder about the time he had a tryout with the Yankees when he was eighteen, but how he decided not to turn pro. He didn't want to break his old man's heart. Halfway through his story, the pain got so sharp he couldn't finish. He left the gym to have lunch.

Lunch was cottage cheese and a piece of Melba toast. By late evening when he got home, he felt that if he didn't have something substantial in his stomach he would collapse.

When Manny entered the house, Martha was beaming with happiness. "Manny," she said. "I've lost another three pounds. I can't believe it. At this rate, in a few days I'll be down to a size twelve. Can you imagine, a size twelve!"

Manny slumped into a chair. Martha looked concerned. "What's the matter, Manny? You don't look well."

"I wish people would stop telling me how lousy I look. I don't feel good. I haven't eaten anything for two days, and I feel heavier than ever."

"When do you see the doctor again?"

"Next Wednesday . . . but to tell the truth, the way I feel, I'm not gonna make it. Every heartbeat seems like it's gonna be my last."

"Take a hot bath and go to bed. You'll feel better tomorrow."

The next morning Manny didn't feel any better. He felt worse. Martha sat on the edge of the bed, her face glowing with a sunny smile. "Manny, you won't believe it," she said. "I've lost another five pounds. I feel wonderful!"

Manny forced himself out of bed. He stepped on the scale. "Oh no!" he groaned.

"What is it?" Martha asked.

Manny pointed down at the scale. "Look," he said, his face a dead white. "I've gained five more pounds. It ain't possible! I haven't had nothing to eat."

"Manny," Martha said accusingly, "are you sure you haven't been sneaking trips to the refrigerator?"

"I haven't eaten nothing! Nothing! It don't make sense. You can't not eat and still gain weight."

"How much did you say you've gained?" Martha asked.

Manny's face was an explosive red. "Five pounds! Five goddamn pounds!"

At breakfast Manny had orange juice and a piece of toast. "I can't live like this," he said, chewing on the dry toast. He could feel the pain digging in beneath his heart. He telephoned Ziggy and instructed him not to pick him up. "Yeh, Ziggy," he said into the phone, "you make the rounds. I still

ain't feeling good. Call me later."

He saw Martha looking at him. "I ain't going out today. I'm going back to bed. I ain't gonna eat a thing all day, and tonight I'm gonna see how much weight I've lost."

Martha spent the day shopping for new clothes. It was early evening when she returned home. Manny was in bed, watching television. Martha entered the bedroom, her arms laden with packages. "Wait until you see the clothes I bought," she said. "I look better than I did ten years ago."

Manny moaned and rolled over. Martha sat down on the side of the bed. "What's the matter? Are you still feeling bad?"

"I been in bed all day. I ain't even had a glass of water, and I'm afraid to get on the scale. I feel like I weigh a ton. My heart still hurts."

"Do you want me to call Dr. Harris?"

"No. What can that quack do? I'll wait and see how I feel tomorrow."

"I've spent the whole day shopping. I've never felt so good. A man even whistled at me when I was getting into the car."

Martha stepped on the scale. There was a wide smile on her face. "I can't believe it. Another

three pounds since this morning."

Manny got out of bed and moved to the scale. He began to moan.

"What is it, Manny?" Martha asked.

"Three pounds! That's what I gained since this morning. Just what you lost, I gained. I haven't left that bed today. You can't gain weight just lying in bed. It don't make sense. It's spooky. You lose three pounds, I gain three pounds. I've gained every pound you've lost since you went on that diet. Martha, you're killing me!"

"Manny, that's the silliest thing I've ever heard of."

"It's true. I see it all now. It's screwy, I admit. But every pound you lose, I gain. I wasn't having any trouble until you went on that diet. You got to start eating before you kill me."

"Manny, that's the craziest thing I've ever heard of. Do you think I'm going to balloon up like a cow again? I'm sick of the fat life. I want to lose another ten pounds, maybe fifteen."

"Martha, if you lose another fifteen pounds, even ten, it'll kill me. I know it like I'm sitting here. I can feel my heart all the time. It's straining, it's heating up. The pain is always there. Even a few more pounds might be too much."

"Tomorrow I'll take you to Dr. Harris. You can go into the hospital for a short time, and your blood pressure will go down. Ziggy can take care of the business."

"You don't understand," Manny pleaded. "I've got a Volkswagen heart in a Mack truck body."

"Manny, I don't get it. You sound delirious. I'd better call the doctor."

"Martha, I'm begging you, please start eating. If you don't eat, I know I'm gonna die. Let's go downstairs, and Millie'll fix you something to eat."

"It's Millie's day off. Besides, I don't want anything to eat."

"I'll fix you something. Come on, I'll make waffles with lots of syrup and butter."

Martha shook her head. "I'm going to take a hot bath and go to bed."

"Martha, you ain't listening. You got to start eating! You don't, I'm a dead duck. Listen, I won't tell no more stories. You know, about my old man, and your days as a dancer at the Copa. I won't even mention Harry Hopkins."

"It doesn't matter, Manny. I'm not going to get fat for anyone. This is the new Martha, the thin Martha."

Manny blocked Martha's way to the bathroom. His breathing was heavy and pain-

ful. He struck Martha hard against the side of the head. She fell to the floor, amazement and fear in her eyes. Manny grabbed a pillow from the bed and covered Martha's face. In a short time she stopped struggling. Manny picked up the phone and called Ziggy.

Manny was sitting in the living room having a drink when Ziggy arrived. "What is it, boss?" Ziggy asked.

"It's Martha, she's had an accident. She's upstairs. Put her in the car, drive her out somewhere, and make it look like a real accident. I don't want no bad publicity. You understand?"

"Sure, boss, nothing to it. You'll read about it in the morning papers."

Ziggy went upstairs and got Martha's body. The next morning Manny read about his wife's death in the papers. He spent the day making funeral arrangements. The funeral took place two days later.

It was a damp, gray day. Manny didn't like funerals, but the pain was gone from his heart, and his black suit didn't seem so tight. His weight, according to the scale in the bedroom, hadn't changed since Martha's death. Manny felt everything was going to be all right.

After the funeral, Ziggy drove him back to the house. Manny invited him in for a drink; he didn't feel like being alone.

They sat in the living room sipping their whiskies. Manny was telling Ziggy that he was going to get into shape. He said that he might start playing handball again. He told Ziggy about the time his old man had beat Jimmy Jacobs, the world champion, for big money.

One moment he was sitting there in the evening light talking to Ziggy, enjoying the sound of his own voice, and the next moment he had stopped talking and the whisky tasted rotten in his mouth, and he knew he had never felt anything like the hot, searing pain that was knifing his heart.

He staggered up the stairs. Ziggy followed him, wondering what was wrong. Manny knew, before he stepped on the scale,

that he had gotten heavier. He saw that he had gained three pounds since morning, and he had eaten very little. He began to sob and speak at the same time.

"Martha, honey, please! I never boxed. I never ran cross-country. Please, Martha, don't do this. My daddy died in prison. I never went to Harry Hopkins. I never went through high school. I never been to England. I can't even swim. I hate water!"

Ziggy was standing in the doorway. Manny grabbed him and continued to sob on Ziggy's small shoulder. "What is it, boss?" Ziggy asked.

The pain around Manny's heart was unbearable. He felt that each searing breath would be his last. He knew his heart was going to stop. "It's no good," he sobbed. "Killing Martha didn't do any good. It's worse. She's still losing weight."

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FICTION

# George and Miss Gleason

by William I. Smith



**“H**ello, George,” Miss Gleason said in her best classroom voice. “So good of you to come.”

“That’s okay,” I said in my little boy voice. Miss Gleason still had that effect on me. “I’m glad to be able to help.”

I was nervous, like I was back in school and there was a test coming up that I hadn’t studied for. Miss Gleason had been my sixth grade teacher. She was one of the few teachers I had who didn’t believe I was stupid. Just kinda slow catching onto things. She gave me the time needed to get things right. I used to work my tail off for her, but that was nothing; all the kids did. She was a different kind of person, a teacher who got real respect. And from the kids in the tough neighborhood I grew up in, that was really something.

“I hear you’ve done well with your boxing,” Miss Gleason said as she poured out the tea I really didn’t want but was afraid to say no to.

“Pretty good,” I said. “Forty-three wins, seven losses. Only the seven losses were my last seven. Got so I was getting beat up pretty bad. Then Mr. Flowers got them to stop fighting me. I never got into the big money, especially the money they’re making today.”

“Mr. Flowers,” Miss Gleason said, sipping her tea. “He’s the contractor who had my house painted, isn’t he?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Painting was one of Mr. Flowers’ legitimate businesses. Actually they’re all legitimate now, but that wasn’t always so. He used to cover bets, run numbers, and make loans that weren’t exactly banker-approved. I used to be in charge of collections, and sometimes assessing our own version of a penalty for late payment.

“Mr. Flowers sent me over to take care of things,” I said. “I didn’t know it was you until I saw you. You haven’t changed.”

“So nice of you to say so, George, but we all change. Sometimes for the better, as you have done.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, feeling all proud inside. Not too many people had told me things to make me feel good. Mama, of course, but even Dad thought I wasn’t too bright. “You say your paint is flaking off?” I asked, changing the subject away from me and back onto what it was supposed to be. I never liked talking about myself anyway.

“Yes, it’s flaking something terrible, and I only had it done last year. It surely should last longer than that, shouldn’t it, George?”

This sounds mild enough written down, but Miss Gleason said it in her stern voice, the one she uses when someone disappoints her. No kid ever stood up to that voice.

"I know we can fix it for you, Miss Gleason," I said. "I'll get ahold of the painter and see he repaints."

"I'm sure you will, George," Miss Gleason said in a voice that made everything all right again.

Augie Hogan was a fat-faced tub of a man with lots of red veins in his nose from all the drinking he used to do. He was what Mr. Flowers called an independent contractor, which meant that Mr. Flowers hired him for jobs but basically he worked for himself. He was the one who painted Miss Gleason's house, and he was the one I went to see.

Augie's house was an old red brick place clear out in University Park. I drove out there, marched up on the porch, and jammed my thumb into the doorbell. I meant business. That didn't get me anywhere, so I tried knocking. That pushed the door open, as it wasn't locked. "Augie!" I yelled. "You home?"

No answer, so I walked on into the house. That's where I found Augie, lying in the middle of the living room, a little blood on his face and a nice neat hole in the middle of his forehead.

Maybe I say this cool enough, but to tell you the truth, it made me a little sick. And scared, too. I didn't know what to do. So I called Mr. Flowers the way I always do when I'm stumped. He said call the cops. I'd gotten 91 dialed into the phone when the front door burst open and in walked this little squirt with dark glasses and lots of messy blond hair. He was dressed casual or sloppy, depending how you looked at it. He was wearing a sweatshirt under a ratty coat. No tie. He said his name was Detective Weber like Detective was his first name. He flashed a badge to prove it.

"You work for Tony Flowers," he told me as if I were too dumb to know. Right away I didn't like him. "The mob still use a .22 to prove how great they shoot?"

"I don't know about any mob," I said. "Mr. Hogan was a painter. He worked for Mr. Flowers the same way I do, only I tend bar and Augie paints."

"And take care of a few other things, don't you?" Detective Weber smiled a yellow-toothed smile and pushed his thick glasses back on his nose.

"I do what Mr. Flowers tells me to do," I said. "Except I don't shoot people. Especially I don't shoot people and then call the police, which I was about to do. If I shot somebody I'd leave right away, before the police got there."

"Except you didn't call the police, and I got here before you could leave." Detective Weber smiled like he'd scored a point. Maybe he had.

"Okay, George," Detective Weber went on, "if you're not planning to shoot people, why are you here?"

I told him. The truth. After he left, I called Mr. Flowers again, told him about Detective Weber, and asked him what I should do next. He said go see Big Freddy DeLeve.

Big Freddy was a small man with a big head. In more ways than one, Mr. Flowers said. Big Freddy was a painting contractor, but mostly he was still in the "business" as Mr. Flowers called it. This meant most of Big Freddy's action was illegal. I was to ask him if he was selling Augie poor quality paint. Not that Mr. Flowers expected a straight answer, but he figured a question like that would stir things up some.

"Hell, no!" was Big Freddy's answer when I found him on the phone in his office over on Kearney.

"Paint should not flake off in one year," I told Freddy.

"Course not." Freddy scratched his big bald head. "And I wouldn't move into Tony's territory. You tell him that."

"I will," I said, and beat it out of there.

The next morning Mr. Flowers and me were sitting at the big round table at the back of Flowers' Bar & Grill, drinking coffee and talking things over, when Detective Weber burst in on us. "I hate you mob scumbags!" he shouted for a greeting. He was all red in the face. And in the eyes, too, as if he hadn't slept well.

"Look," Mr. Flowers corrected him gently, if not entirely truthfully, "I know nothing about any mob."

"You do too!" Detective Weber shot back. "We know who you are. We got lists of all you mob guys. You killed my father, and I'm going to get you for it."

"I never heard of your father," Mr. Flowers said patiently. "And I never killed anyone."

"Or had them killed? My father was a cop on the beat. You had him killed when he started getting in the way."

"I never had anyone killed," Mr. Flowers said.

This was true as far as I knew, and I'd been with Mr. Flowers a long time. Sure, a few guys had been taught a lesson here and there, but nothing a quick trip to the emergency room couldn't handle.

"Ha!" Detective Weber said, not too originally. He was wearing the same crummy outfit he'd had on yesterday, only today he was holding one of those squashed hats you could mash up and it would come right out of it. Detective Weber was twisting and twisting it around in his hands like he was trying to hurt it. "You make me sick. I'd do anything to get rid of you."

Next Detective Weber made me go through my whole story again. When I finished and Detective Weber was starting to question me again, Mr. Flowers got up from the table and went around the bar to the phone behind it.

"Hey! What you doing?" Detective Weber yelled.

"Calling the police," Mr. Flowers snapped. "You're harassing us, and we don't have to put up with it."

"Harassing!" Detective Weber laughed an unfunny laugh and jammed his crumpled hat back on his head. "If you think this is harassment, you've got something to learn. I'll show you what real harassment is. By God, I will!" With that he marched the length of the bar and out the front door without another word.

"We've got a real problem." Mr. Flowers went behind the bar again. This time he picked up the coffeepot instead of the phone. He came back to the table, topped off our cups, and returned the pot to its place. "I don't want the cops poking around in our business. Especially not that Weber clown."

I didn't say anything. Mr. Flowers was talking more to himself than me. He didn't expect me to come up with any Big Ideas. Big Ideas was his department; carrying them out was mine.

"You think Freddy's being straight with us?" Mr. Flowers finally asked.

"No," I said. "Freddy's never straight with anybody."

"And he's got two or three things more going than he can handle. I'm going to put Jim Lamb on him; see what he can find out." Jim Lamb was an old friend of Mr. Flowers and a P.I. If anyone could find out what Big Freddy was up to, Jim Lamb could.

"Tell you what, George," Mr. Flowers went on after a little more thought. "Why don't you touch bases with that Miss Gleason of yours? See what she might know."

"Okay," I said. "But Miss Gleason wouldn't hurt anybody. Big Freddy and Augie being in cahoots and having a falling out, that's a much better bet."

"I think so, too, George, but you check out Miss Gleason anyway, okay?"

"Okay," I said. I'd have to show Mr. Flowers he was wrong about Miss Gleason.

Miss Gleason was working in her garden when I got there. I picked up a hoe and helped her some with the weeds until it got too hot and she suggested we go inside for some iced tea.

In the kitchen she got a pitcher of tea out of the icebox and poured us each a glass. We took our drinks into the living room and settled into comfortable chairs.

"Does your Mr. Flowers think I had something to do with poor Augie's death?" Miss Gleason asked, sipping tea.

"Not really, ma'am," I said. "He's just trying to check everything out."

"Oh." Miss Gleason laughed a little. I had never heard her laugh before. "I'll tell you what, George; Augie and I talked some while he was painting. He was having trouble meeting his child support payments. You might look into that. Augie needed money. Maybe his ex-wife could tell you how he was getting it."

That sounded like a good idea. I called Mr. Flowers and put it to him. "Go ahead with it, George," he said, sounding a little surprised I'd come up with an idea. I didn't tell him it was Miss Gleason's idea. He might not have trusted it then.

Now the problem was to find Augie's ex-wife. I knew her name was Angel. I'd seen her several times when she'd come to Augie's fights. She was a cold-looking woman who didn't show much on her face whether Augie won or lost.

But she did count the money he made, and when he stopped making it, she sure left him quick enough. Not that Augie was too sad, watching her walk away, but he did miss the kids.

Which was too bad, but my problem now was finding Angel. Miss Gleason and I went through the phone book, but there was no Angel Hogan listed. "Here," Miss Gleason said when we'd covered all the possibilities. "There's an A. W. Hogan out on Hudson Street, just off East Colfax. That's probably your person, George."

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I drove out East Colfax to the apartment building. I went up the front steps to the door and pushed the little button under the name A. W. Hogan. A familiar voice—a man's—came out of the speaker, wanting to know what I wanted.

"To talk to you, Freddy," I said. "And ask you what you're doing here."

"Paying my respects to the widow," Freddy said. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you: to talk to the widow. Let me in, Freddy."

"Nuts," he said and said no more.

"I'm the one found the body," I said, hoping he was still listening. "There's something about it Angel ought to know."

It worked. Freddy buzzed me into the apartment. When I got upstairs, I was met by Freddy at the door. "What you got," he asked, spreading his arms at the door frame so I couldn't get in.

"I've got a piece of paper I found under the body," I said, starting to answer his question with the story Miss Gleason had thought up. "It's in a foreign language my friend says is Spanish. Angel could read it, and she might be interested in what it says."

"Okay." Freddy held out his hand. "Give it to me. I'll see Angel gets it."

"Can't do that," I said. "Haven't got it with me. My friend says Angel should pay a hundred dollars for it."

"Nuts to that!" Freddy stepped back into the room and slammed the door in my face.

As I was walking away from the building, someone called my name. It was Jim Lamb, the private eye Mr. Flowers had put to work on our troubles.

"What are you doing here, George?" he asked.

"Trying to talk to Angel Hogan," I said. "How about you? Mr. Flowers send you to help me out?"

"No." Jim stood there scratching his head on top where the bald spot was. "I been looking into Augie's finances. He and Big Freddy DeLeve have been running a numbers racket. Also they've been spreading around some cheap paint. Starts flaking off within a year."

"That explains Miss Gleason's problem," I said.

"Sure does," Jim said. "It's beginning to look like Big Freddy had a falling out with Augie and killed him. You suppose Angel was in on it, too?"



"I don't know." I scratched my head, which was still pretty thick with hair. "It's too much for me."

"Why don't you go back to Flowers' and tell Tony what's happening. I'll stay here and keep following Big Freddy. See where that leads."

I said okay, but first I went back to see Miss Gleason again.

"All right, George," she said when I finished telling her everything that had happened at Angel's apartment. "I want you to go back to the beginning and tell me everything that has happened since you discovered the body. Try not to leave anything out, even if it doesn't seem important to you."

I did. I'm pretty good at remembering stuff. I was the first one in Miss Gleason's class to remember all my multiplication tables, though I never did figure out what fractions were all about.

When I finished, Miss Gleason smiled, nodded her head, and told me what a good job I had done. "We're going over to see your Mr. Flowers now," she said. "Why don't you call Mr. DeLeve and Angel and tell them if they meet us there you'll give them the piece of paper you told them about? And let's hurry. Things are coming to a head."

When we got to Flowers', there was quite a crowd ahead of us. Detective Weber was there, along with Big Freddy and Angel Hogan, who was looking thinner and sharper in the face than I remembered her.

They were all yelling at each other and at Mr. Flowers, who was sitting at his round table, sipping coffee and ignoring all of them. I heard the word "subpoena" from Detective Weber, and several words I won't repeat from Big Freddy and Angel.

Finally Miss Gleason stepped up to the bar and banged on it with an empty beer mug sitting there. "Quiet, please," she said, without raising her voice, and would you believe it, everybody shut up! "Thank you so much," Miss Gleason went on. "I am glad to see you all here. It should not take too long to clear everything up."

Boy, she sure had everybody's attention now. Even Detective Weber was quiet, and looking straight at her.

"Someone killed Augie Hogan, and that someone is right here in this room. Whoever did the job tried to make it look like a . . . mob hit, I believe the term is. A mob hit arranged to look like a suicide. But putting the gun by Mr. Hogan's right hand was a mistake. Mr. Hogan was left-handed. Now, George knew this, as

did Angel, his wife. So did Mr. DeLeve, his associate in certain criminal practices. And at the time of the killing, Mr. Flowers was right here in front of many witnesses, so it could not have been him. That leaves . . .”

“Are you crazy, you old bag?” shouted Detective Weber. “I hate the mob. I couldn’t . . .”

“Precisely why you committed the crime,” Miss Gleason went on when Detective Weber sputtered to a stop. “You hated the mob, so you killed Mr. Hogan in a manner that would be blamed on them.”

“You can’t prove that!” shouted Detective Weber. “You don’t even have a good reason to think so.”

“Oh yes, I do,” Miss Gleason said in her calmest schoolroom voice. “You were on the scene right after George discovered the body. He didn’t have a chance to call you. And another thing: you knew the caliber of the murder weapon before you even saw it. You were waiting for someone to discover the body.”

“That don’t prove nothin’.” Detective Weber was still yelling. “I’ve a good mind to run you all in.” Here Detective Weber pulled out his gun and pointed it at Mr. Flowers. “Except you!” he snarled. “I’m going to kill you right now, you . . .”

This is when Jim Lamb stepped into the room and hit Detective Weber over the head with the sap I’d given him as a joke last Christmas.

“The man is quite unstable,” Miss Gleason said after the cops had come and taken Detective Weber away. The rest of us were still there in Flowers’ Bar & Grill. “I think he will confess easily enough if questioned properly.”

“No doubt,” Mr. Flowers said. “And it sure was fortunate Jim was following Angel and Big Freddy. You saved my life, Jim. I owe you.”

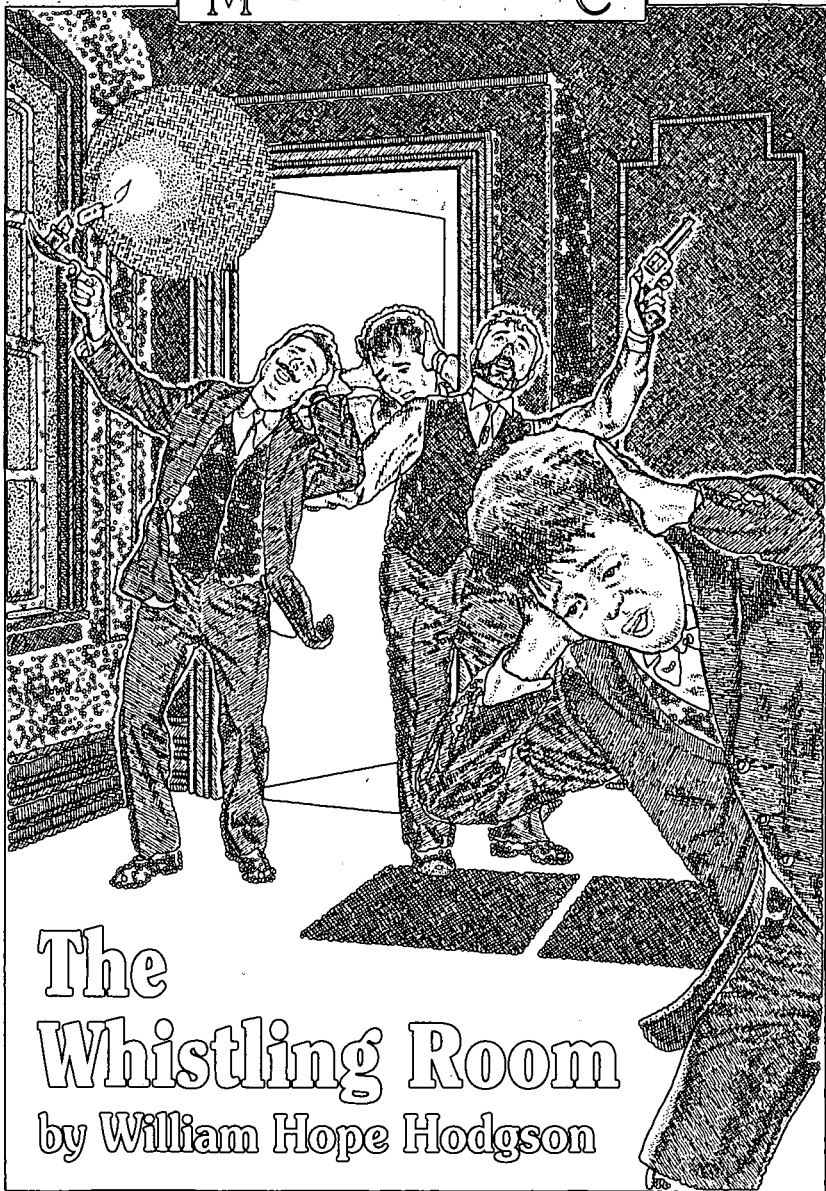
“All in a day’s work,” Jim said. “I’ll send you a bill.”

“I guess you guys got me off the hook,” Big Freddy said. “I was looking good for Augie’s murder there for a while.”

“Glad to help,” Mr. Flowers said in a voice he used when he was bullin’ someone. “Here’s to happier days.” He raised his coffee cup, to which he’d added a splash of brandy. The rest of us raised our glasses, too.

Miss Gleason sipped her iced tea.

# MYSTERY CLASSIC



## The Whistling Room

by William Hope Hodgson

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Carnacki shook a friendly fist at me as I entered, late. Then he opened the door into the dining room and ushered the four of us—Jessop, Arkright, Taylor and myself—in to dinner.

We dined well, as usual, and equally as usual Carnacki was pretty silent during the meal. At the end we took our wine and cigars to our accustomed positions and Carnacki—having got himself comfortable in his big chair—began without any preliminary:

"I have just got back from Ireland, again," he said. "And I thought you chaps would be interested to hear my news. Besides, I fancy I shall see the thing clearer after I have told it all out straight. I must tell you this, though, at the beginning—up to the present moment I have been utterly and completely stumped. I have tumbled upon one of the most peculiar cases of haunting—or devilment of some sort—that I have come against. Now listen.

"I have been spending the last few weeks at Iastrae Castle, about twenty miles northeast of Galway. I got a letter about a month ago from a Mr. Sid K. Tassoc, who it seemed had bought the place lately and moved in, only to find that he had got a very peculiar piece of property.

"When I reached there, he met me at the station and drove me up to the castle. I found that he was 'pigging it' there with his boy brother and another American who seemed to be half servant and half companion. It appears that all the servants had left the place, in a body as you might say, and now they were managing among themselves, assisted by some day help.

"The three of them got together a scratch feed, and Tassoc told me all about the trouble whilst we were at table. It is most extraordinary and different from anything that I have had to do with, though that 'Buzzing' Case was very queer, too.

"Tassoc began right in the middle of his story. 'We've got a room in this shanty,' he said, 'which has got a most infernal whistling in it, sort of haunting it. The thing starts any time, you never know when, and it goes on until it frightens you. It's not ordinary whistling and it isn't the wind. Wait till you hear it.'

"'We're all carrying guns,' said the boy, and slapped his coat pocket.

"'As bad as that?' I said, and the older brother nodded. 'I may be soft,' he replied, 'but wait till you've heard it. Sometimes I think it's some infernal thing, and the next moment I'm just as sure that someone's playing a trick on us.'

" 'Why?' I asked. 'What is to be gained?'

" 'You mean,' he said, 'that people usually have some good reason for playing tricks as elaborate as this. Well, I'll tell you. There's a lady in this province by the name of Miss Donnehue who's going to be my wife, this day two months. She's more beautiful than they make them, and so far as I can see, I've just stuck my head into an Irish hornet's nest. There's about a score of hot young Irishmen been courting her these two years gone, and now that I've come along and cut them out, they feel raw against me. Do you begin to understand the possibilities?'

" 'Yes,' I said. 'Perhaps I do in a vague sort of way, but I don't see how all this affects the room?'

" 'Like this,' he said. 'When I'd fixed it up with Miss Donnehue, I looked out for a place and bought this one. Afterwards I told her, one evening during dinner, that I'd decided to tie up here. And then she asked me whether I wasn't afraid of the whistling room. I told her it must have been thrown in gratis, as I'd heard nothing about it. There were some of her men friends present, and I saw a smile go round. I found out after a bit of questioning that several people have bought this place during the last twenty-odd years. And it was always on the market again, after a trial.'

" 'Well, the chaps started to bait me a bit and offered to take bets after dinner that I'd not stay six months in this shanty. I looked once or twice at Miss Donnehue, but I could see that she didn't take it as a joke at all. Partly, I think, because there was a bit of a sneer in the way the men were tackling me and partly because she really believed there is something in this yarn of the whistling room.'

" 'However, after dinner I did what I could to even things up with the others. I nailed all their bets and screwed them down good and safe. I guess some of them are going to be hard hit, unless I lose; which I don't mean to. Well, there you have practically the whole yarn.'

" 'Not quite,' I told him. 'All that I know is that you have bought a castle with a room in it that is in some way "queer," and that you've been doing some betting. Also, I know that your servants have got frightened and run away. Tell me something about the whistling.'

" 'O, that!' said Tassoc. 'That started the second night we were in. I'd had a good look round the room in the daytime, as you can understand; for the talk up at Arlestrae—Miss Donnehue's

place—had me wonder a bit. But it seems just as usual as some of the other rooms in the old wing, only perhaps a bit more lonesome feeling. But that may be only because of the talk about it, you know.

“The whistling started about ten o'clock on the second night, as I said. Tom and I were in the library when we heard an awfully queer whistling coming along the East Corridor—the room is in the East Wing, you know.

““That's that blessed ghost!” I said to Tom, and we collared the lamps off the table and went up to have a look. I tell you, even as we dug along the corridor it took me a bit in the throat, it was so beastly queer. It was a sort of tune in a way, but more as if a devil or some rotten thing were laughing at you and going to get round at your back. That's how it makes you feel.

“‘When we got to the door we didn't wait, but rushed it open, and then I tell you the sound of the thing fairly hit me in the face. Tom said he got it the same way—sort of felt stunned and bewildered. We looked all around and soon got so nervous we just cleared out and I locked the door.

“‘We came down here and had a stiff drink each. Then we felt better and began to feel we'd been nicely had. So we took sticks and went out into the grounds, thinking after all it must be some of these confounded Irishmen working the ghost-trick on us. But there was nothing stirring.

“‘We went back into the house and walked over it and then paid another visit to the room. But we simply couldn't stand it. We fairly ran out and locked the door again. I don't know how to put it into words, but I had a feeling of being up against something that was rottenly dangerous. You know! We've carried our guns ever since.

“‘Of course we had a real turnout of the room next day and the whole house-place, and we even hunted round the grounds but there was nothing queer. And now I don't know what to think, except that the sensible part of me tells me that it's some plan of these wild Irishmen to try to take a rise out of me.'

“‘Done anything since?' I asked him.

“‘Yes,' he said. ‘Watched outside of the door of the room at night and chased round the grounds and sounded the walls and floor of the room. We've done everything we could think of and it's beginning to get on our nerves, so we sent for you.'



"By this time we had finished eating. As we rose from the table Tassoc suddenly called out:—'Ssh! Listen!'

"We were instantly silent, listening. Then I heard it, an extraordinary hooning whistle, monstrous and inhuman, coming from far away through corridors to my right.

"'By God!' said Tassoc, 'and it's scarcely dark yet! Collar those candles, both of you, and come along.'

"In a few moments we were all out of the door and racing up the stairs. Tassoc turned into a long corridor and we followed, shielding our candles as we ran. The sound seemed to fill all the passage as we drew near, until I had the feeling that the whole air throbbed under the power of some wanton Immense Force—a sense of an actual taint, as you might say, of monstrosity all about us.

"Tassoc unlocked the door then, giving it a push with his foot, jumped back, and drew his revolver. As the door flew open, the sound beat out at us with an effect impossible to explain to one who has not heard it—with a certain, horrible personal note in it, as if in the darkness you could picture the room rocking and creaking in a mad, vile glee to its own filthy piping and whistling and hooning, and yet all the time aware of you in particular. To stand there and listen was to be stunned by Realization. It was as if someone showed you the mouth of a vast pit suddenly and said: That's Hell. And you *knew* that they had spoken the truth. Do you get it, even a little bit?

"I stepped a pace into the room and held the candle over my head and looked quickly round. Tassoc and his brother joined me and the man came up at the back and we all held our candles high. I was deafened with the shrill, piping hoon of the whistling, and then, clear in my ear something seemed to be saying to me:—'Get out of here—quick! Quick! Quick!'

"As you chaps know, I never neglect that sort of thing. Sometimes it may be nothing but nerves, but as you will remember, it was just such a warning that saved me in the 'Grey Dog' Case and in the 'Yellow Finger' Experiments, as well as other times. Well, I turned sharp round to the others: 'Out!' I said. 'For God's sake, out, quick!' And in an instant I had them into the passage.

"There came an extraordinary yelling scream into the hideous whistling and then, like a clap of thunder, an utter silence. I slammed the door, and locked it. Then, taking the key, I looked round at the others. They were pretty white, and I imagine I must have looked that way, too. And there we stood a moment, silent.



"'Come down out of this and have some whisky,' said Tassoc, at last, in a voice he tried to make ordinary; and he led the way. I was the back man, and I knew we all kept looking over our shoulders. When we got downstairs, Tassoc passed the bottle round. He took a drink himself and slapped his glass on to the table. Then sat down with a thud.

"'That's a lovely thing to have in the house with you, isn't it!' he said. And directly afterwards:—'What on earth made you hustle us all out like that, Carnacki?'

"'Something seemed to be telling me to get out, *quick*,' I said. 'Sounds a bit silly—superstitious, I know, but when you are meddling with this sort of thing you've got to take notice of queer fancies and risk being laughed at.'

"I told him then about the 'Grey Dog' business, and he nodded a lot to that. 'Of course,' I said, 'this may be nothing more than those would-be rivals of yours playing some funny game, but personally, though I'm going to keep an open mind, I feel that there is something beastly and dangerous about this thing.'

"We talked for a while longer and then Tassoc suggested billiards, which we played in a pretty half-hearted fashion, and all the time cocking an ear to the door for sounds; but none came, and later after coffee he suggested early bed and a thorough overhaul of the room in the morning.

"My bedroom was in the newer part of the castle, and the door opened into the picture gallery. At the east end of the gallery was the entrance to the corridor of the East Wing; this was shut off from the gallery by two old and heavy oak doors which looked rather odd and quaint beside the more modern doors of the various rooms.

"When I reached my room, I did not go to bed but began to unpack my instrument trunk. I intended to take one or two preliminary steps at once in my investigation of the extraordinary whistling.

"Presently, when the castle had settled into quietness, I slipped out of my room and across to the entrance of the great corridor. I opened one of the low, squat doors and threw the beam of my pocket searchlight down the passage. It was empty and I went through the doorway and pushed to the oak behind me. Then along the great passageway, throwing my light before and behind and keeping my revolver handy.

"I had hung a 'protection belt' of garlic round my neck, and the smell of it seemed to fill the corridor and give me assurance; for as you all know, it is a wonderful 'protection' against the more usual Aeiirii forms of semi-materialization by which I supposed the whistling might be produced, though at that period of my investigation I was still quite prepared to find it due to some perfectly natural cause, for it is astonishing the enormous number of cases that prove to have nothing abnormal in them.

"In addition to wearing the necklet I had plugged my ears loosely with garlic, and as I did not intend to stay more than a few minutes in the room, I hoped to be safe.

"When I reached the door and put my hand into my pocket for the key, I had a sudden feeling of sickening funk. But I was not going to back out if I could help it. I unlocked the door and turned the handle. Then I gave the door a sharp push with my foot as Tassoc had done and drew my revolver, though I did not expect to have any use for it, really.

"I shone the searchlight all round the room and then stepped inside with a disgustingly horrible feeling of walking slap into a waiting danger. I stood a few seconds, expectant, and nothing happened and the empty room showed bare from corner to corner. And then, you know, I realized that the room was full of purposeful silence, just as sickening as any of the filthy noises the Things have power to make. Do you remember what I told you about the 'Silent Garden' business? Well this room had just that same *malevolent* silence—the beastly quietness of a thing that is looking at you and not seeable itself, and thinks that it has got you. Oh, I recognized it instantly and I slipped the top off my lantern so as to have light over the *whole* room.

"Then I set to working like fury and keeping my glance all about me. I sealed the two windows with lengths of human hair, right across, and sealed them at every frame. As I worked a queer, scarcely perceptible tenseness stole into the air of the place, and the silence seemed, if you can understand me, to grow more solid. I knew then that I had no business there without 'full protection,' for I was practically certain that this was no mere Aeiirii development, but one of the worse forms, such as the Saiitii; like that 'Grunting Man' Case—you remember.

"I finished the window and hurried over to the great fireplace. This is a huge affair and has a queer gallows-iron, I think they are called, projecting from the back of the arch. I sealed the opening

with seven human hairs—the seventh crossing the six others.

“Then just as I was making an end, a low mocking whistle grew in the room. A cold, nervous prickling went up my spine and round my forehead from the back. The hideous sound filled the room with an extraordinary, grotesque parody of human whistling, too gigantic to be human—as if something gargantuan and monstrous made the sounds softly. As I stood there a last moment, pressing down the final seal, I had little doubt but that I had come across one of those rare and horrible cases of the *Inanimate* reproducing the functions of the *Animate*. I made a grab for my lamp and went quickly to the door, looking over my shoulder and listening for the thing that I expected. It came just as I got my hand upon the handle—a squeal of incredible, malevolent anger, piercing through the low hooning of the whistling. I dashed out, slamming the door and locking it.

“I leant a little against the opposite wall of the corridor, feeling rather funny for it had been a hideously narrow squeak . . . ‘thyr be noe sayfetie to be gained bye gayrds of holieness when the monyster hath pow’r to speak throe woode and stoene.’ So runs the passage in the Sigsand MS. and I proved it in that ‘Nodding Door’ business. There is no protection against this particular form of monster, except possibly for a fractional period of time; for it can reproduce itself in or take to its purposes the very protective material which you may use and has power to ‘forme wythine the pentycle,’ though not immediately. There is, of course, the possibility of the Unknown Last Line of the Saaamaaa Ritual being uttered, but it is too uncertain to count upon and the danger is too hideous, and even then it has no power to protect for more than ‘maybe fyve beats of the harte’ as the Sigsand has it.

“Inside of the room there was now a constant, meditative, hooning whistling, but presently this ceased and the silence seemed worse for there is such a sense of hidden mischief in a silence.

“After a little I sealed the door with crossed hairs and then cleared off down the great passage and so to bed.

“For a long time I lay awake but managed eventually to get some sleep. Yet about two o’clock I was waked by the hooning whistling of the room coming to me, even through the closed doors. The sound was tremendous and seemed to beat through the whole house with a presiding sense of terror. As if (I remember thinking)

some monstrous giant had been holding mad carnival with itself at the end of that great passage.

"I got up and sat on the edge of the bed, wondering whether to go along and have a look at the seal, and suddenly there came a thump on my door and Tassoc walked in with his dressing gown over his pajamas.

"I thought it would have waked you, so I came along to have a talk," he said. "I *can't* sleep. Beautiful! Isn't it?"

"Extraordinary!" I said, and tossed him my case.

"He lit a cigarette and we sat and talked for about an hour, and all the time that noise went on down at the end of the big corridor.

"Suddenly Tassoc stood up:

"Let's take our guns and go and examine the brute," he said, and turned towards the door.

"No!" I said. "By Jove—NO! I can't say anything definite yet, but I believe that the room is about as dangerous as it well can be."

"Haunted—*really* haunted?" he asked, keenly and without any of his frequent banter.

"I told him, of course, that I could not say a definite yes or no to such a question, but that I hoped to be able to make a statement soon. Then I gave him a little lecture on the False Re-Materialization of the Animate-Force through the Inanimate-Inert. He began then to understand the particular way in which the room might be dangerous, if it were really the subject of a manifestation.

"About an hour later the whistling ceased quite suddenly, and Tassoc went off again to bed. I went back to mine also, and eventually got another spell of sleep.

"In the morning I walked along to the room. I found the seals on the door intact. Then I went in. The window seals and the hair were all right, but the seventh hair across the great fireplace was broken. This set me thinking. I knew that it might very possibly have snapped, through my having tensioned it too highly; but then, again, it might have been broken by something else. Yet it was scarcely possible that a man, for instance, could have passed between the six unbroken hairs, for no one would ever have noticed them, entering the room that way, you see; but just walked through them, ignorant of their very existence.

"I removed the other hairs and the seals. Then I looked up the chimney. It went up straight, and I could see blue sky at the top. It was a big, open flue and free from any suggestion of hiding

places or corners. Yet, of course, I did not trust to any such casual examination, and after breakfast I put on my overalls and climbed to the very top, sounding all the way, but I found nothing.

"Then I came down and went over the whole of the room—floor, ceiling, and the walls, mapping them out in six inch squares and sounding with both hammer and probe. But there was nothing unusual.

"Afterwards I made a three weeks' search of the whole castle in the same thorough way, but found nothing. I went even further then, for at night, when the whistling commenced, I made a microphone test. You see, if the whistling were mechanically produced, this test would have made evident to me the working of the machinery if there were any such concealed within the walls. It certainly was an up-to-date method of examination, as you must allow.

"Of course I did not think that any of Tassoc's rivals had fixed up any mechanical contrivance, but I thought it just possible that there had been some such thing for producing the whistling made away back in the years, perhaps with the intention of giving the room a reputation that would insure its being free of inquisitive folk. You see what I mean? Well of course it was just possible, if this were the case, that someone knew the secret of the machinery and was utilizing the knowledge to play this devil of a prank on Tassoc. The microphone test of the walls would certainly have made this known to me, as I have said, but there was nothing of the sort in the castle so that I had practically no doubt at all now but that it was a genuine case of what is popularly termed 'haunting.'

"At this time, every night, and sometimes most of each night the hooning whistling of the Room was intolerable. It was as if an Intelligence there knew that steps were being taken against it and piped and hooned in a sort of mad, mocking contempt. I tell you, it was as extraordinary as it was horrible. Time after time I went along—tiptoeing noiselessly on stockinged feet—to the sealed door (for I always kept the room sealed). I went at all hours of the night, and often the whistling inside would seem to change to a brutally jeering note, as though the half-animate monster saw me plainly through the shut door. And all the time as I would stand, watching, the hooning of the whistling would seem to fill the whole corridor so that I used to feel a precious lonely chap messing about there with one of Hell's mysteries.

"And every morning I would enter the room and examine the different hairs and seals. You see, after the first week, I had stretched parallel hairs all along the walls of the room and along the ceiling, but over the floor, which was of polished stone, I had set out little colorless wafers, sticky-side uppermost. Each wafer was numbered and then arranged after a definite plan so that I should be able to trace the exact movements of any living thing that went across.

"You will see that no material being or creature could possibly have entered that room without leaving many signs to tell me about it. But nothing was ever disturbed, and I began to think that I should have to risk an attempt to stay a night in the room in the Electric Pentacle. Mind you, I *knew* that it would be a crazy thing to do, but I was getting stumped and ready to try anything.

"Once about midnight, I did break the seal on the door and have a quick look in, but I tell you, the whole Room gave one mad yell and seemed to come towards me in a great belly of shadows as if the walls had bellied in towards me. Of course, that must have been fancy. Anyway, the yell was sufficient, and I slammed the door and locked it, feeling a bit weak down my spine. I wonder whether you know the feeling.

"And then when I had got to that state of readiness for anything I made what, at first, I thought was something of a discovery:

"'Twas about one in the morning and I was walking slowly round the castle, keeping in the soft grass. I had come under the shadow of the East Front and far above me I could hear the vile, hooning whistling of the Room up in the darkness of the unlit wing. Then suddenly, a little in front of me, I heard a man's voice speaking low, but evidently in glee:

"'By George!, you chaps, but I wouldn't care to bring a wife home to that!' it said, in the tone of the cultured Irish.

"Someone started to reply, but there came a sharp exclamation and then a rush and I heard footsteps running in all directions. Evidently the men had spotted me.

"For a few seconds I stood there feeling an awful ass. After all, *they* were at the bottom of the haunting! Do you see what a big fool it made me seem? I had no doubt but that they were some of Tassoc's rivals, and here I had been feeling in every bone that I had hit a genuine Case! And then, you know, there came the memory of hundreds of details that made me just as much in doubt again.

Anyway, whether it was natural or abnatural, there was a great deal yet to be cleared up.

"I told Tassoc next morning what I had discovered and through the whole of every night for five nights we kept a close watch round the East Wing, but there was never a sign of anyone prowling about; and all this time, almost from evening to dawn, that grotesque whistling would hoon incredibly, far above us in the darkness.

"On the morning after the fifth night I received a wire from here which brought me home by the next boat. I explained to Tassoc that I was simply bound to come away for a few days, but told him to keep up the watch round the castle. One thing I was very careful to do and that was to make him absolutely promise never to go into the Room between sunset and sunrise. I made it clear to him that we knew nothing definite yet, one way or the other, and if the room were what I had first thought it to be, it might be a lot better for him to die first than enter it after dark.

"When I got here and had finished my business, I thought you chaps would be interested and also I wanted to get it all spread out clear in my mind, so I rang you up. I am going over again tomorrow, and when I get back, I ought to have something pretty extraordinary to tell you. By the way, there is a curious thing I forgot to tell you. I tried to get a phonographic record of the whistling, but it simply produced no impression on the wax at all. That is one of the things that has made me feel queer.

"Another extraordinary thing is that the microphone will not magnify the sound—will not even transmit it, seems to take no account of it, and acts as if it were nonexistent. I am absolutely and utterly stumped up to the present. I am a wee bit curious to see whether any of you dear clever heads can make daylight of it. I cannot—not yet."

He rose to his feet.

"Goodnight, all," he said, and began to usher us out abruptly, but without offense, into the night.

A fortnight later he dropped us each a card, and you can imagine that I was not late this time. When we arrived Carnacki took us straight in to dinner, and when we had finished and all made ourselves comfortable, he began again, where he had left off:

"Now, just listen quietly, for I have got something very queer to tell you. I got back late at night and I had to walk up to the



castle as I had not warned them that I was coming. It was bright moonlight, so that the walk was rather a pleasure than otherwise. When I got there, the whole place was in darkness, and I thought I would go round outside to see whether Tassoc or his brother was keeping watch. But I could not find them anywhere and concluded that they had got tired of it and gone off to bed.

"As I returned across the lawn that lies below the front of the East Wing, I caught the hooning whistling of the Room coming down strangely clear through the stillness of the night. It had a peculiar note in it, I remember—low and constant, queerly meditative. I looked up at the window, bright in the moonlight, and got a sudden thought to bring a ladder from the stableyard and try to get a look into the Room from the outside.

"With this notion I hunted round at the back of the castle among the straggle of the office and presently found a long, fairly light ladder, though it was heavy enough for one, goodness knows! I thought at first that I should never get it reared. I managed at last and let the ends rest very quietly against the wall a little below the sill of the larger window. Presently I had my face above the sill and was looking in, alone with the moonlight.

"Of course the queer whistling sounded louder up there, but it still conveyed that peculiar sense of something whistling quietly to itself—can you understand? Though for all the meditative lowness of the note, the horrible, gargantuan quality was distinct—a mighty parody of the human, as if I stood there and listened to the whistling from the lips of a monster with a man's soul.

"And then, you know, I saw something. The floor in the middle of the huge, empty room was puckered upwards in the center into a strange, soft-looking mound parted at the top into an everchanging hole that pulsed to that great, gentle hooning. In time, as I watched, I saw the heaving of the indented mound gap across with a queer, inward suction as with the drawing of an enormous breath, then the thing would dilate and pout once more to the incredible melody. And suddenly as I stared, dumb, it came to me that the thing was living. I was looking at two enormous, blackened lips, blistered and brutal, there in the pale moonlight . . .

"Abruptly they bulged out to a vast pouting mound of force and sound, stiffened and swollen and hugely massive and clean-cut in the moonbeams. And a great sweat lay heavy on the vast upper lip. In the same moment of time the whistling had burst into a

mad screaming note that seemed to stun me, even where I stood, outside of the window. And then the following moment I was staring blankly at the solid, undisturbed floor of the room—smooth, polished stone flooring from wall to wall. And there was an absolute silence.

“You can picture me staring into the quiet Room and knowing what I knew. I felt like a sick, frightened child, and I wanted to slide *quietly* down the ladder and run away. But in that very instant I heard Tassoc’s voice calling to me from within the Room for help, *help*. My God! but I got such an awful dazed feeling, and I had a vague, bewildered notion that, after all, it was the Irishmen who had got him in there and were taking it out of him. And then the call came again, and I burst the window and jumped in to help him. I had a confused idea that the call had come from within the shadow of the great fireplace, and I raced across to it, but there was no one there.

“Tassoc!” I shouted, and my voice went empty-sounding round the great apartment, and then in a flash *I knew that Tassoc had never called*. I whirled round, sick with fear, towards the window and as I did so a frightful, exultant whistling scream burst through the Room. On my left the end wall had bellied-in towards me in a pair of gargantuan lips, black and utterly monstrous, to within a yard of my face. I fumbled for a mad instant at my revolver; not for *it* but myself, for the danger was a thousand times worse than death. And then suddenly the Unknown Last Line of the Saaas-maaa Ritual was whispered quite audibly in the room. Instantly the thing happened that I have known once before. There came a sense as of dust falling continually and monotonously, and I knew that my life hung uncertain and suspended for a flash in a brief, reeling vertigo of unseeable things. Then *that* ended, and I knew that I might live. My soul and body blended again, and life and power came to me. I dashed furiously at the window and hurled myself out head-foremost, for I can tell you that I had stopped being afraid of death. I crashed down onto the ladder and slithered, grabbing and grabbing and so came some way or other alive to the bottom. And there I sat in the soft, wet grass with the moonlight all about me and far above through the broken window of the Room, there was a low whistling.

“I was not hurt and went to the front and knocked. When they let me in, we had a long yarn over some good whisky—for I was

shaken to pieces—and I explained things as much as I could. I told Tassoc that the room would have to come down and every fragment of it be burned in a blast furnace erected within a pentacle. He nodded. There was nothing to say. Then I went to bed.

“We turned a small army on to the work, and within ten days that lovely thing had gone up in smoke and what was left was calcined and clean.

“It was when the workmen were stripping the paneling that I got hold of a sound notion of the beginnings of that beastly development. Over the great fireplace, after the great oak panels had been torn down, I found that there was let into the masonry a scrollwork of stone with on it an old inscription in ancient Celtic, that here in this room was burned Dian Tiansay, Jester of King Alzof, who made the Song of Foolishness upon King Ernore of the Seventh Castle. When I got the translation clear, I gave it to Tassoc. He was tremendously excited, for he knew the old tale and took me down to the library to look at an old parchment that gave the story in detail. Afterwards I found that the incident was well known about the countryside, but always regarded more as a legend than as history. And no one seemed ever to have dreamt that the old East Wing of Iastrae Castle was the remains of the ancient Seventh Castle.

“From the old parchment I gathered that there had been a pretty dirty job done, away back in the years. It seems that King Alzof and King Ernore had been enemies by birthright, as you might say truly, but that nothing more than a little raiding had occurred on either side for years until Dian Tiansay made the Song of Foolishness upon King Ernore and sang it before King Alzof, and so greatly was it appreciated that King Alzof gave the jester one of his ladies to wife. Presently all the people of the land had come to know the song and so it came at last to King Ernore, who was so angered that he made war upon his old enemy and took and burned him and his castle; but Dian Tiansay, the jester, he brought with him to his own place and having torn his tongue out because of the song which he had made and sung, he imprisoned him in the Room in the East Wing (which was evidently used for unpleasant purposes), and the jester’s wife he kept for himself, having a fancy for her prettiness.

“But one night Dian Tiansay’s wife was not to be found, and in the morning they discovered her lying dead in her husband’s arms

and he sitting whistling the Song of Foolishness, for he had no longer the power to sing it.

"Then they roasted Dian Tiansay in the great fireplace—probably from the self-same 'gallows-iron' which I have already mentioned. And until he died Dian Tiansay 'ceased not to whistle' the Song of Foolishness which he could no longer sing. But afterwards 'in that room' there was often heard at night the sound of something whistling and there 'grew a power in that room' so that none dared to sleep in it. And presently, it would seem, the king went to another castle for the whistling troubled him.

"There you have it all. Of course, that is only a rough rendering of the translation from the parchment. It's a bit quaint! Don't you think so?"

"Yes," I said, answering for the lot. "But how did the thing grow to such a tremendous manifestation?"

"One of those cases of continuity of thought producing a positive action upon the immediate surrounding material," replied Carnacki. "The development must have been going forward through centuries, to have produced such a monstrosity. It was a true instance of Saiitii manifestation which I can best explain by likening it to a living spiritual fungus which involves the very structure of the aether-fibre itself, and, of course, in so doing acquires an essential control over the 'material-substance' involved in it. It is impossible to make it plainer in a few words."

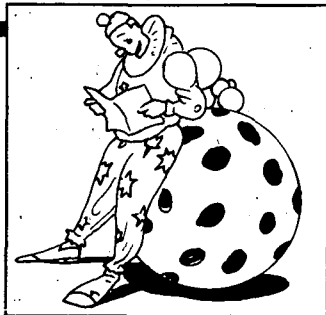
"Then you believe that the Room itself had become the material expression of the ancient jester—that his soul, rotted with hatred, had bred into a monster—eh?" I asked.

"Yes," said Carnacki, nodding. "I think you've put my thoughts rather neatly. It is a queer coincidence that Miss Donnehue is supposed to be descended (so I heard since) from the same King Ernore. It makes one think some rather curious thoughts, doesn't it? The marriage coming on and the Room waking to fresh life. If she had gone into that room, ever . . . eh? It had waited a long time. Sins of the fathers. Yes, I thought of that. They're to be married next week, and I am to be best man, which is a thing I hate. And he won his bets, rather! Just think, *if* ever she had gone into that room. Pretty horrible, eh?" He nodded his head, grimly, and we four nodded back. Then he rose and took us collectively to the door and presently thrust us forth in friendly fashion on to the Embankment and into the fresh night air.

"Goodnight," we called back and went to our various homes. If she had, eh? If she had? That is what I kept thinking.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Looking for a new male private eye to follow around? That's not an easy assignment these days. You can, however, seek out Richard Hill's **Shoot the Piper** (St. Martin's, \$18.95), the second case to feature Randall Gatsby Sierra. Jock MacLeod, an old college buddy of Gat's, wrote a cult novel in the sixties that made MacLeod a fortune, and established his literary reputation for life. Seems he's finally decided to write another book, this one a search for his Scottish roots, so off he goes to Great Britain with the only copy of the manuscript and a huge cash advance from his publisher. It comes as no surprise to Gat that the old devil has disappeared, and Gat's personal history with MacLeod counsels him to stay well out of it. But Jock's wife is also an old friend, and the money is undeniably good, so he sets out for Great Britain to retrace Jock's steps. Thus begins *Shoot the Piper*, a private eye narrative structured as a road novel, with great momentum, larger-than-life characters, and a sensibility that is definitely off the beaten path. Hill's is a fresh voice on the private eye scene, reminding us that the genre may be tired but it certainly isn't dead.

Suspend all disbelief, ye who enter the pages of Marian Babson's **Nine Lives to Murder** (St. Martin's, \$18.95), and you should have a jolly good time. Prominent Shakespearean actor and notorious ladies' man Winstanley Fortescue wakes up from a coma with just the dimmest memory of what happened to him. How did he get here? He was rehearsing his starring role in a West End drama based on a real crime, and thoroughly enjoying working again with Miranda, his lovely actress wife. He'd been confident that

knighthood was in his future. And he'd been juggling two minor but rather delicious affairs without his beloved Miranda's even suspecting. All was definitely right with his world. He remembers falling heavily from a ladder during rehearsal. He'd collided head-to-head with Monty, the stage cat. But that doesn't explain how Win finds himself in the cat's body while his own (which he fondly refers to as "The Instrument") lies in intensive care, trapping poor old Monty with it. Time is running out as opening night approaches, and the murderer tries again. But Win's a trouper, and watching him catch the killer (not to mention backstage mice!) is a frothy bit of feline fun.

Jan Burke's **Goodnight, Irene** (Avon, \$4.99) is a powerful debut novel starring Irene Kelly, a former newspaperwoman who stalked out of the paper one fine day and marched into a job in public relations. She's stayed close to O'Connor, a crusty journalist who was once her mentor. His death by mail bomb devastates her; gunshots fired through her front windows, however, urge her into action. She returns to the paper to fill O'Connor's shoes, believing that his death must have been related to a story he was pursuing. But clues seem to point to O'Connor's thirty-five year obsession with "Handless Hannah," the name the press gave a pregnant young woman found under the pier in 1955, her face unrecognizable, missing both hands and feet. O'Connor's sister was the victim of a murder, and he never really closed the file on Hannah. "Somebody misses that girl," he would tell Irene, and every year he ran a column about Jane Does, and Hannah in particular. His column led to the identification of a number of young women over the years, but Hannah remained a mystery woman. Burke packs a lot of punch into Irene's tough-minded search for her friend's killer.

Angela Benbow and Caledonia Wingate are two of the most colorful characters who reside in Camden-sur-Mer, a posh retirement hotel in coastal California. **Murder by Owl Light** by Corinne Holt Sawyer (Ballantine, \$4.99) is their third foray into amateur sleuthing, and it's solid light entertainment. When a soft drinks maintenance man is stabbed outside the hotel one night, Sergeant Benson draws the straw. The ladies aren't very interested in the murder, actually. Like the police, they assume it was a botched attempt at robbery. And to their minds, Benson is a clod who obviously can't recognize first-rate insider assistance even when it's staring him in the face, so very different from the handsome young Lieutenant Martinez whom they "helped" on previous cases. Then Rollo Bagwell is murdered, and there isn't a resident alive

who doesn't regret the untimely demise of such a good gardener and groundskeeper. Such a firm hand with the bougainvillea! Furthermore, murder seems to be coming closer to the insulated community of the residents themselves. Watching this geriatric team of sleuths at work to catch a serial killer is tongue-in-cheek fun.

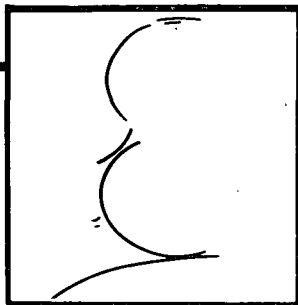
The author of the highly praised *Track of the Cat*, Nevada Barr brings back park ranger Anna Pigeon in **A Superior Death** (Putnam, \$19.95). A superior mystery it is, too. Anna has been assigned to a new post, a far cry from her beloved Texas. She's pulling chilly summer duty in Isle Royale National Park, a remote island off the coast of Michigan. The park is a lure for canoeists and campers who long for privacy, while divers are attracted to the famous sunken vessels, complete with trapped corpses, that lie deep in its clear waters. But it seems there's a recent arrival to this watery graveyard, a local diver eccentrically dressed in the old fashioned costume of a ship's captain. Barr writes with a naturalist's keen eye for detail and an environmentalist's passion for the outdoors. The book is also rich in plot and action, and held together by a protagonist who is private, passionate, and gutsy—a darn good read.

Mary Higgins Clark's latest, **Remember Me** (Simon & Schuster, \$23.50) should please her legion of fans. Menley Nichols is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder triggered by her guilt at the accidental death of her two-year-old son. But this summer things are looking up. The birth of their daughter Hannah has brought Menley and her husband Adam together again. The couple has rented "Remember House," a furnished eighteenth century house on the coast of Cape Cod, where Adam can join his family when he can break away from his hectic law practice in the city. And Menley has an idea for her next children's book. She will retell the legend behind her summer home, the tale of a young bride accused of adultery while her husband was away at sea; she lost both her baby and her bitter husband on his next voyage. But the house has secrets of its own. As Adam fights to free a young island man accused of murdering his wealthy bride, Menley must struggle to keep her wits, fighting for her child, her sanity, and perhaps even her life. Clark spices up this romantic suspense story with Cape Cod atmosphere and lore, both past and present.



# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**I**magine waking up every morning with no memory of the day before, the week before, or anything before. That's what's happened to the amiable but determined Maurice Pogue in the entertaining detective spoof *Clean Slate*.

The fact that he's a private detective and involved in a pretty heavy case makes Pogue's predicament a life-threatening one. He's due to testify against a big mob boss in a case involving a car bombing set up to keep a witness quiet; the theft of a coin worth millions is also tossed into the stew. The bigtime crook is out to get Pogue to prevent him from telling a jury what he knows.

What the crime boss doesn't know, and what even Pogue's closest friends don't know, is that he has no recollection of what happened the night of the

explosion, nor does he know who anyone is, a condition that also spells trouble in his love life, which involves more than one sexy friend.

Early on, Pogue, played by Dana Carvey, finds himself in a somewhat bewildering, although not unenjoyable, situation. A black-clad femme fatale who clearly knows Pogue very well bursts into his second story, rundown Venice Beach office, breathlessly telling him, "They're following me. They're trying to kill me."

Sarah Novak (Valeria Golina) is Jessica Rabbit come to life. And although Pogue has no idea who she is and what kind of danger she's in, he's forced to go along with her and use his private eye skills to figure it out.

*Clean Slate* doesn't hit you with a joke every other second, in the style of *Fatal Instinct*,

which tossed so many jokes at the audience that some were sure to work. It has a more easygoing pace. And while the idea of a detective with no memory may strike some as silly, there are enough different strands of mystery—who's the girl, where's the coin, who can Pogue trust—to make a solid rope of a plot.

Also, this spoof offers a couple of clever reminders of Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, in which Robert Donat's Richard Hannay finds himself the target of killers, although he's not quite sure why. One scene mimicked in the Carvey caper is Donat eluding his pursuers by pretending to be the featured speaker at a local political meeting. Although he doesn't know the subject matter at hand, he manages to thoroughly engage the crowd and escape during its raucous ovation.

In Hitchcock's 1935 classic, the insidiously villainous Professor Jordan is missing a finger. In director Mick (*L.A. Story*, *The Bodyguard*) Jackson's effort, crime boss Cornell is missing a thumb, and Pogue manages to inadvertently poke fun at it every time.

A well done facet of this feature is its forties style. From the costumes (Carvey's bowtie and suspenders and Golina's

Garbolike suit) to the seedy Venice Beach setting, we get a clear sense of period. Pogue's office is particularly well set up with deco furniture, Venetian blinds, and the rest.

As the hapless, forgetful gumshoe, Carvey is genial. He's no matinee idol, he's never quite put together, and he's got no sharp edges. He makes you worry a bit about him, about how he'll manage to take care of himself.

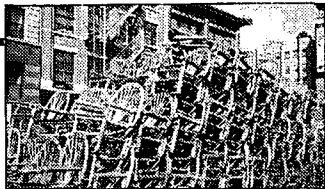
Valeria Golina, as his mysterious girlfriend and partner in peril, offers her own comic spin to the story and is a well-qualified romantic interest.

The supporting cast, including James Earl Jones as a wheelchair-bound district attorney, is top-rate, if underused. Michael Gambon, the heavysset crime boss, is hilarious. A scene in which Pogue mistakes him for the landlord is a real laugh.

Then there's the dog. As if the filmmakers weren't sure there would be enough laughs, they gave Pogue a terrier with a depth-perception problem. But while the pooch's sight gags are amusing, they're mostly unnecessary.

*Clean Slate* is no major thought-provoking whodunit, but it's a clever enough sendup of the old-style potboilers to make it enjoyable.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious won by Charlotte Rich-  
ington. Honorable men-  
McPherson of Fort  
Canada; James Sadle-  
ewan, Canada; Jeanne  
Florida; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; Charles  
D. Bowers, Jr., of Mulberry, Florida; and Ted Mancuso of Santa Cruz, California.

Photograph contest was  
ards of Tacoma, Wash-  
tions go to Michael C.  
McMurray, Alberta,  
myer of Odessa, Saskatch-  
Wocking of Zephyrhill,

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## A CHAIR-ITABLE THEFT by Charlotte Richards

Rufus McMahon, the real estate tycoon, had recently built a large apartment complex in the heart of the city. He planned to furnish the apartments with the cheapest furniture possible while charging the highest rent the traffic would bear. As he talked to his newly hired apartment manager, John Hood, on the phone, he cackled with glee at the prospect of simultaneously cutting costs and maximizing his profits.

"Yeah, John, I'm expecting a shipment of furniture for McMahon Manor today. Make sure all the dining room chairs are accounted for. They're cheap junk, but I don't want any of the stuff disappearing."

The next day, when he visited the Manor to see if all the chairs had been delivered, he was shocked to find this note tacked up in the bare foyer:

TO: RUTHLESS RUFUS

*If your furniture shows a disparity  
From what you expected to find,  
Please let me just say with sincerity,  
Although I am robbing you blind,  
A soft-hearted thief's not a rarity  
(I am often quite thoughtful and kind),  
So the proceeds are going to charity.  
(Please note how this poem is signed.)*

ROBBIN' HOOD

The note was in the handwriting of his new apartment manager. He had unknowingly hired the infamous Rhyming Robber to manage his assets.

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(c) Total amount for 3 ads \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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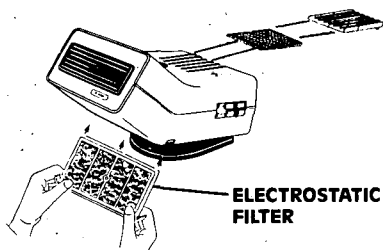
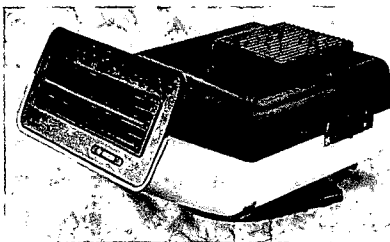
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